City Series Volume1

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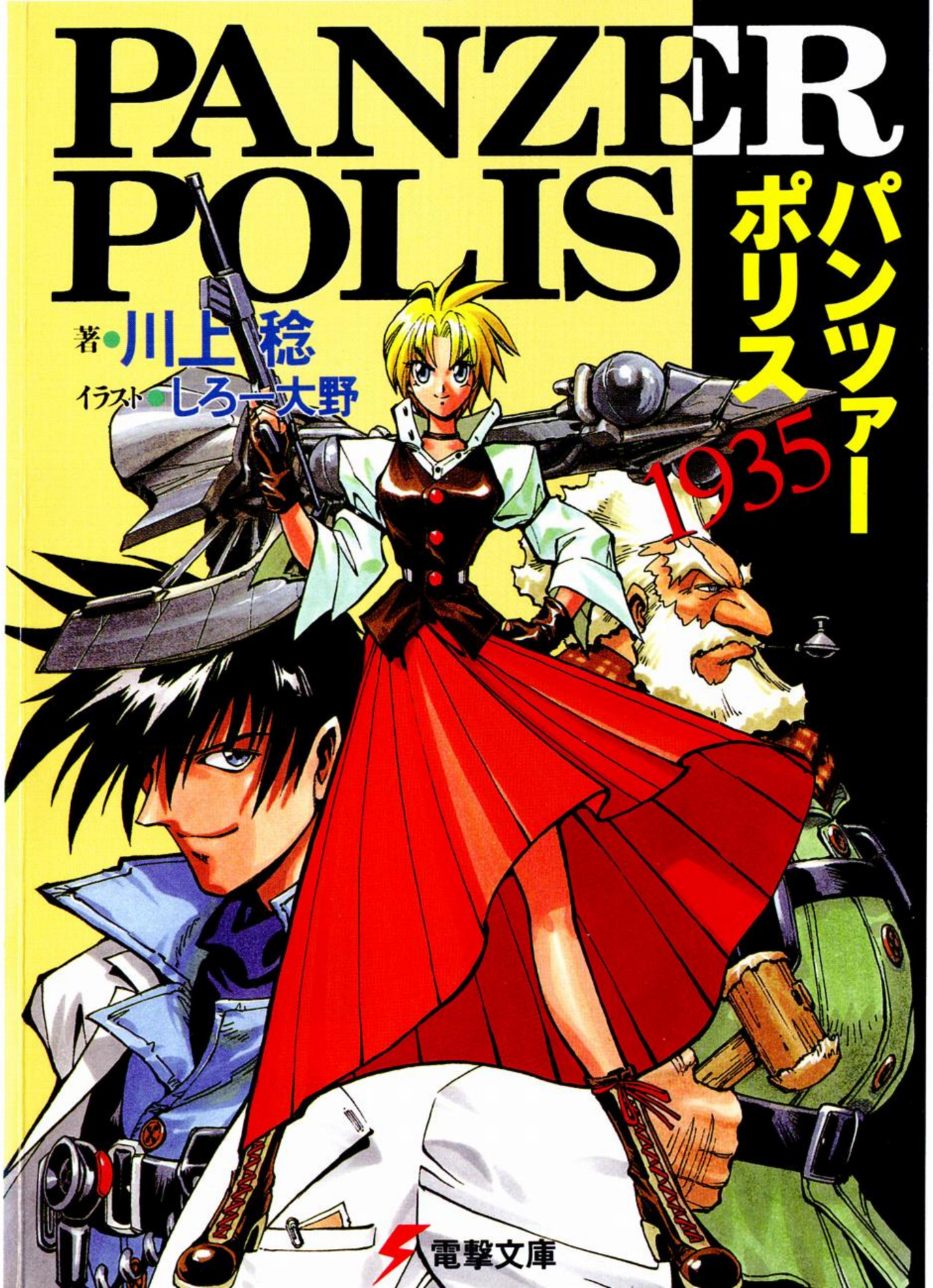
パンツァーポリス1935

ナチスドイツが危険な脈動を始める時代、この異世界の“ベルリン”でも、宇宙を目指す青年が現れた。

彼の名は、ヴァルター。この世に恐れるものはない！ってな感じの傲岸不遜な青年である。彼は頑固一徹の技師パウルとともに、大気圏脱出が可能な超常識飛行戦闘艦カイザーブルクを完成させるが、おかげでドイツ軍に追われる羽目に。軍はカイザーブルクの圧倒的な戦闘力に目を付けたのだ！

変形成長する飛行戦闘艦。光剣で斬りむすぶ空中戦と、数多くのアイディアを盛り込んで、第３回電撃ゲーム小説大賞〈金賞〉受賞作がついに発進！



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川上 稔
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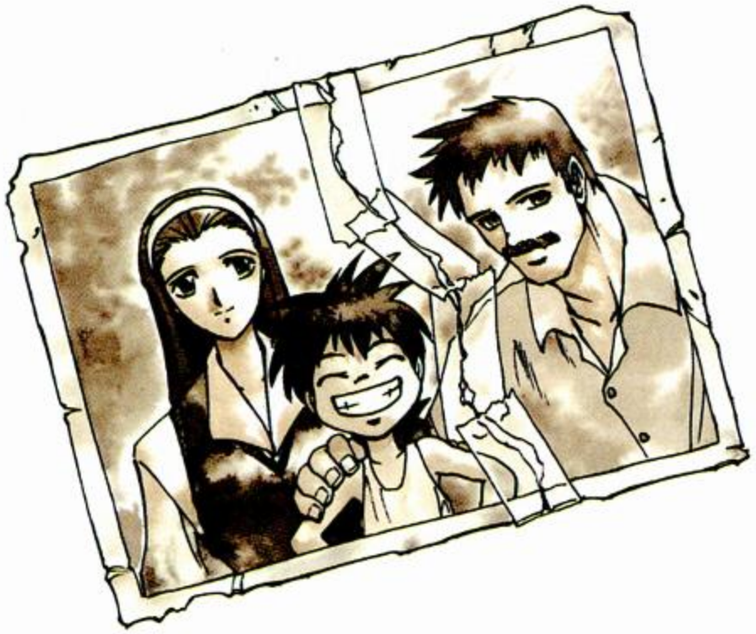


かわかみ みのる
川上 稔

1975年1月3日生まれの東京出身。メル・ギブソンと誕生日が同じ事がとりあえずの自慢。大器を感じさせる鷹揚さと、さっぱりとした割り切りとを併せ持つ好青年である。第3回電撃ゲーム小説大賞で〈金賞〉を受賞した今作品で作家デビュー。

【電撃文庫作品】

パンツァーポリス1935

イラスト：しろー大野

格闘ゲームと山本正之をこよなく愛し、原稿に魂を刻み込む熱血マンガ家。現在「ガオ！」で『OZNオズヌ』を連載中。コミックス①巻（DC）もよろしくネ。

カバー／旭印刷

Title Page

WELCOME TO PANZERPOLIS BERLIN

PANZER POLIS

Panzerpolis 1935

Kawakami
Minoru

Welcome to Panzerpolis Berlin

Panzerpolis 1935

Kawakami Minoru

Protagonists

Walter

An arrogant young man who acts as though he fears nothing.

Paul

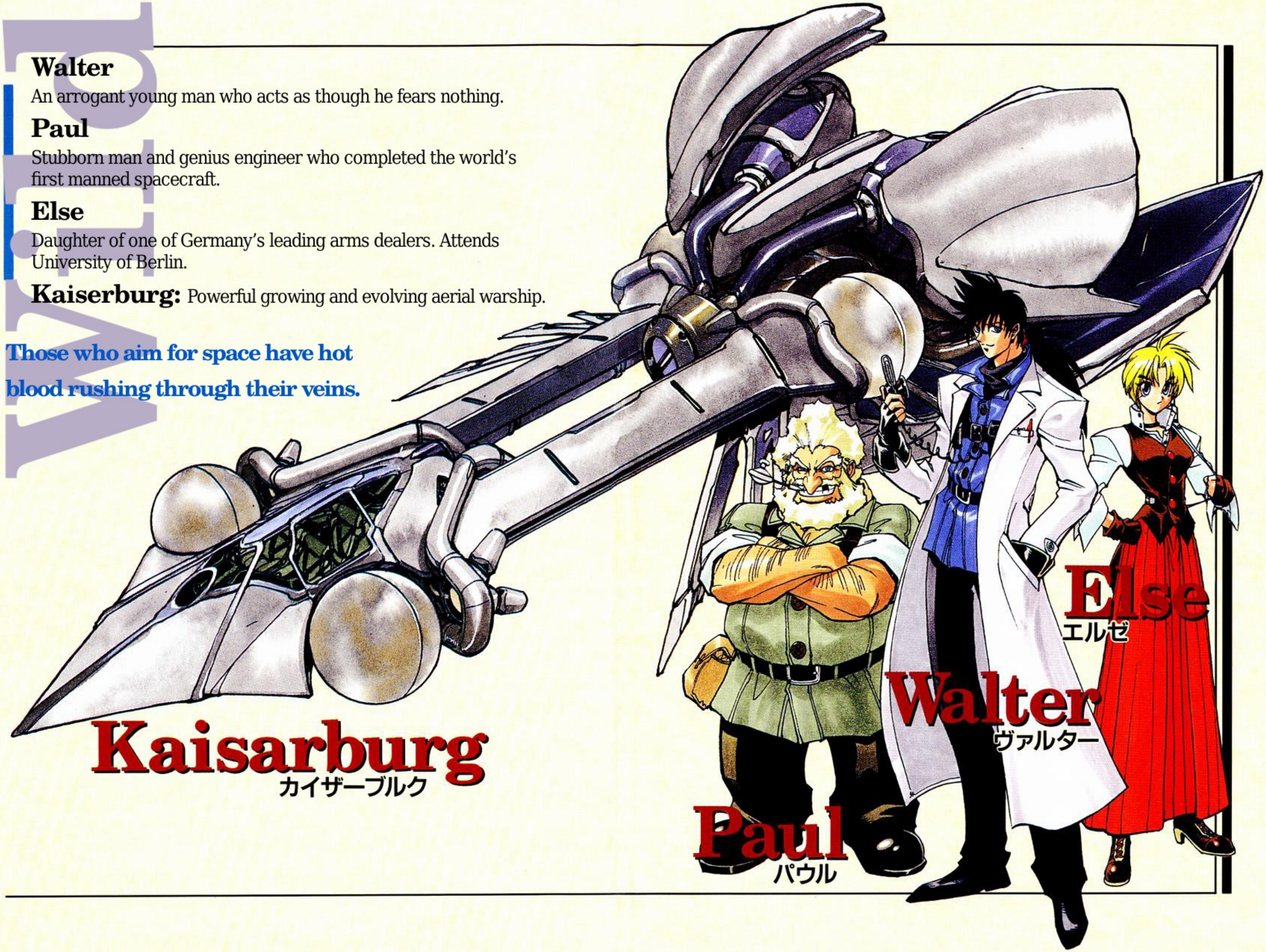
Stubborn man and genius engineer who completed the world's first manned spacecraft.

Else

Daughter of one of Germany's leading arms dealers. Attends University of Berlin.

Kaiserburg: Powerful growing and evolving aerial warship.

Those who aim for space have hot blood rushing through their veins.



Background word: Wild

Text:

Walter: An arrogant young man who acts as though he fears nothing.

Paul: Stubborn man and genius engineer who completed the world's first manned spacecraft.

Else: Daughter of one of Germany's leading arms dealers. Attends University of Berlin.

Kaiserburg: Powerful growing and evolving aerial warship.

Text: Those who aim for space have hot blood rushing through their veins.

Antagonists

ブラドリック
ブルク

Bladlik burg

オスカー

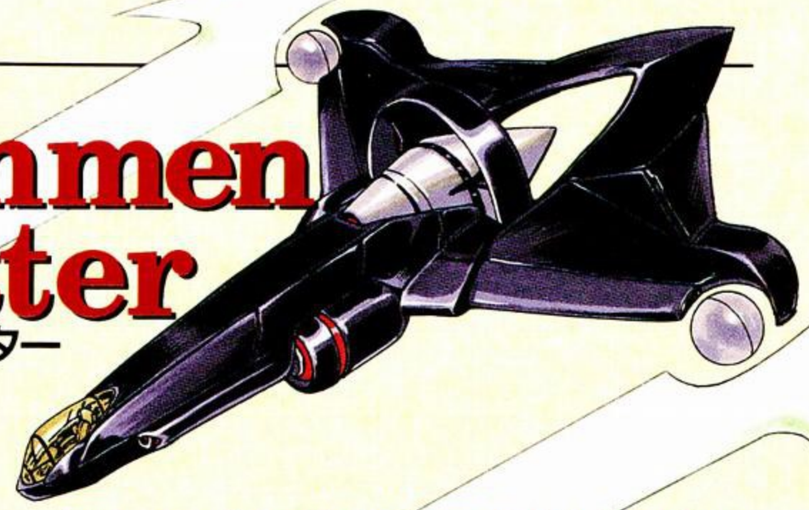
Oscar

アイゼン・
セルダット

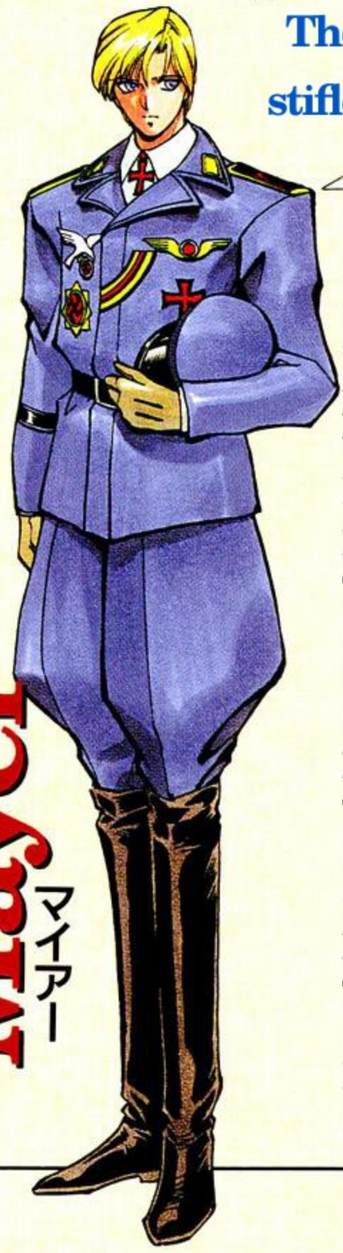
Eisen soldat

Flammen ritter

フランメンリッター



Those who wish for a stable nation stifle themselves to fulfill their duty.



マイアー

Mayer

Oscar
Commander of Air Force Division 5. In many ways, the ideal soldier. Pursues the Kaiserburg.

Mayer
Walter's former underclassman and a kind soldier.

Flammen Ritter (Flame Knight)
The German military's cutting-edge craft with jet-powered VTOL ability. Possesses a variety of special equipment.

Eisen Soldat (Iron Soldier)
The German Air Force's spirit rocket craft. Equipped with a spirit scramjet so it can be launched from aerial ships.

Bladlikburg (Bladlik Castle)
The German Air Force's giant armored aerial ship. The upper sail acts as a launch zone for aircraft, so it functions as an aerial aircraft carrier.

Background word: Calm

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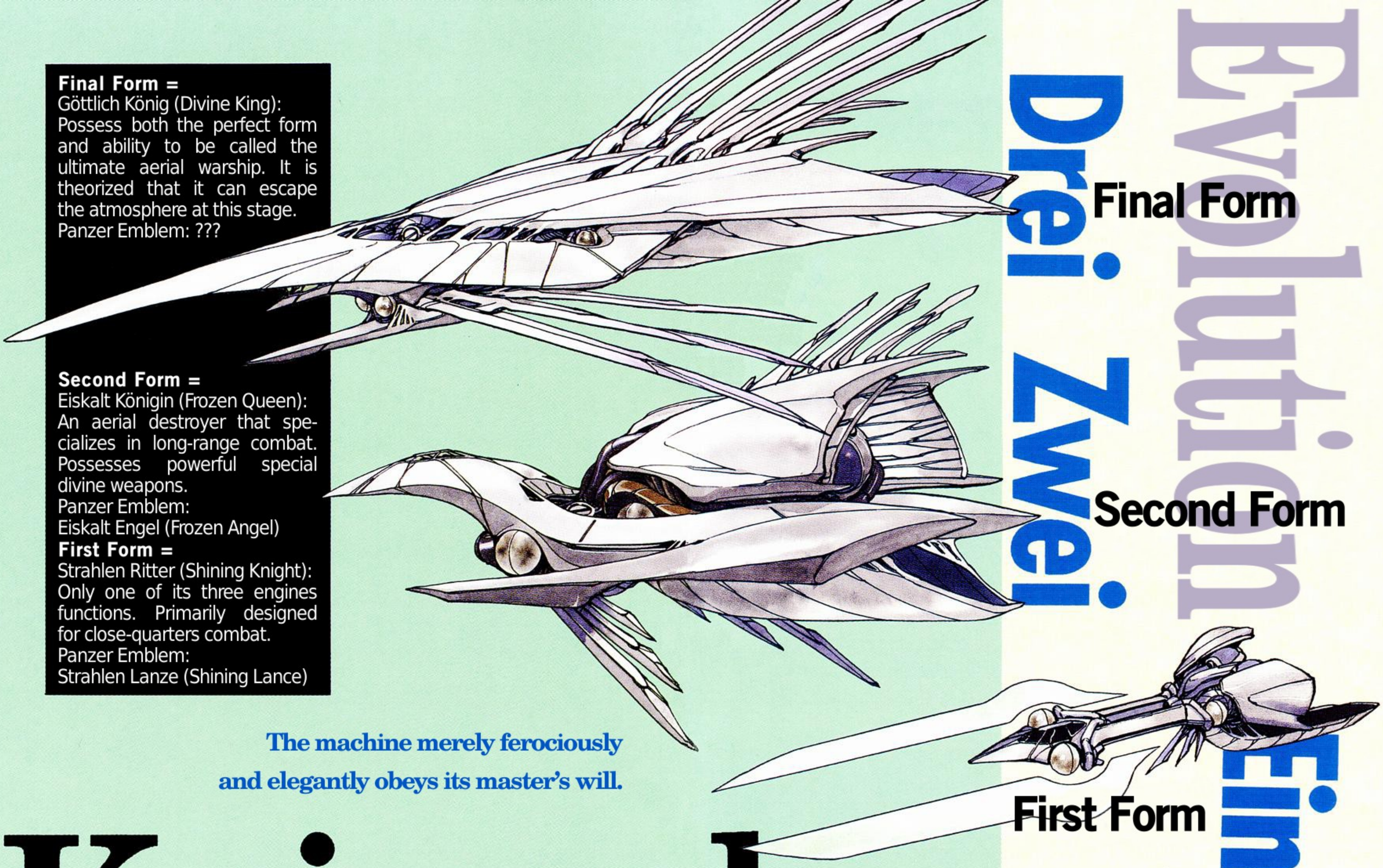
Kaiserburg

Final Form =
Göttlich König (Divine King):
Possess both the perfect form and ability to be called the ultimate aerial warship. It is theorized that it can escape the atmosphere at this stage.
Panzer Emblem: ???

Second Form =
Eiskalt Königin (Frozen Queen):
An aerial destroyer that specializes in long-range combat. Possesses powerful special divine weapons.
Panzer Emblem:
Eiskalt Engel (Frozen Angel)

First Form =
Strahlen Ritter (Shining Knight):
Only one of its three engines functions. Primarily designed for close-quarters combat.
Panzer Emblem:
Strahlen Lanze (Shining Lance)



Evolution

Drei • Zwei • Eins

Final Form

Second Form

First Form

The machine merely ferociously and elegantly obeys its master's will.

Kaisar burg

Background word: Evolution

Left words:

Final Form

Second Form

First Form

Black box:

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Text: The machine merely ferociously and elegantly obeys its master's will.

Timeline

1698: Savery (English) creates a spirit engine model.
1710: Newcomen (English) creates a real spirit engine.
1853: The Black Ships arrive in Japan. Isolationist policies removed.
1871: Germany unified around Prussia. Holy German Empire formed.
1875: Paul Wagner is born.
1879: Huber Talstrasse is born.
1894: Maxim (English) flies the first spirit airplane.
1897: Paul joins the German military as a technician.
1901: Nobel Prize established. Huber discovers the Tomb of the Mother of a Thousand Pharaohs in Egypt.
1906: Paul successfully alters gravity with a spirit engine.
1910: Huber attempts to reach the South Pole but gives up. On the way, he gets to know Paul, one of the German military technicians sent as backup.
1911: Amundsen (Norwegian) reaches the South Pole. Walter is born.
1914: World War One begins.
1915: Else Breuer is born.
1916: Huber discovers the Great Cave on the battlefront of France.
1919: Holy German Empire collapses. Becomes the German Republic.
1920: The first manned extra-atmospheric probe is launched by Germany. Piloted by Huber Talstrasse. Designed by Paul Wagner.

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Opening Words

Let us talk about when man first sailed into space.

It was around sixty years ago, during the First World War. It was a time without the complete emblem gravity engines we have today and a time before the identity of the moon was known.

The stage was set in the iron city, Panzerpolis Berlin.

There, some people wished to visit space to an almost reckless degree.

This story's protagonists are those people.

Now, are you ready?

Then let the story begin.

Prologue: The Legend Begins

Part 1

12/25/1920

It was 4:05 PM.

The ultra-high altitude control center of Berlin's air force base was a giant stepped space located thirty meters below the base. Due to being a control center and due to being underground, it was only lit by the tiny lights of gauges and electric devices.

Hopeless words filled that darkness.

"The ascent trajectory is veering off!"

A giant electric display covered one wall and the symbol it displayed verified those words.

It was a danger signal.

This was entirely unexpected.

They had all just finished breathing a sigh of relief after successfully launching history's first manned spacecraft.

The multistage spirit engine rocket carried Huber Talstrasse, Germany's most famous adventurer, and the rocket had risen while leaving only scorch marks on the giant launch pad.

The footage of the rocket slicing through the night sky had excited the technicians and they had even grown intoxicated on the joy, so they did not immediately understand what the displayed symbol meant.

The next words they heard brought them to their senses.

"It's going to soar out into space!"

The manned spacecraft named the Wilhelm 2 was only built to travel in satellite orbit. If it left the gravitational field, the pilot would die.

The technicians looked worriedly at the electric display and rushed back to their posts. A heavy atmosphere hung over them as work resumed.

Among their strained muttering, a single man remained silent. He was a short middle-aged man with a protruding gut and he wore an air force work jacket.

His bearded face looked up at the display covering an entire wall.

The danger signal had already vanished. Instead, several ballistic curves illuminated the control room with blue light. None of the long curves showed any sign of returning to the original course.

They indicated the spaceship would never again return.

“How are we supposed to explain this?”

Hearing someone mutter that, the man looked over toward a large communication device in the center of the room. It resembled a giant desk and was installed with several gauges and displays.

A young man in a lab coat held his head in front of the communication mic sticking out from the desk. He was likely the communications technician.

He would eventually have to inform the spaceship of the situation.

However, he did not have the courage to tell the pilot the truth, so he was simply holding his head.

The middle-aged man shouted at the technician’s cowardice.

“Hey, you!”

Those words rang sharply through the noisy control room.

A surprised silence soon filled the room.

Ignoring all of the technicians focused on him, the man moved his short legs to reach the communicator.

The young technician took a step back to give the older man control.

That was the right decision.

In response, the older man grabbed the neck of the mic and looked up at the young man.

“Connect me to the ship.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

The young man frantically manipulated the communicator.

The needles on all of the device’s gauges moved back and forth and light filled a few of the display boards.

“Is it still not ready?”

“You can communicate once the gauge in front of the mic reaches the far right side.”

The needle was slow.

“Can’t you speed it up?”

The older man must have realized his irritated question was immature because he glanced over and gave a quiet apology.

"Sorry."

He did not know if the younger man replied or not because he immediately turned back to the communicator.

The gauge's needle was approaching the right side.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the technicians looking at him.

Someone spoke quietly.

"Who is he?"

Without looking up from the gauge, he shouted an answer to the somehow spiteful voice.

"I am Paul Wagner, a design officer for the air force! I'm the *meister* that designed the Wilhelm 2!"

After that, he inhaled as if gathering strength.

And he exhaled.

The breath took the form of a screaming shout.

"The pilot Huber Talstrasse is a close friend of mine!"

Part 2

The first words over the communicator were inappropriately cheerful.

"Hey. How're things over there?"

The voice came from Huber on the spaceship. Due to the radio link, his voice was a little scratchy.

His words reverberated from all of the speakers in the control room.

Hearing his friend's voice so suddenly caused Paul to gasp for just an instant.

He replied with his gaze still lowered.

"How are things with you?"

The distance to space created a time lag in the communication. The response came after a two second delay.

"That you, Paul? It seems I'm wandering around outer space here. I'm doing fine, though."

"I see. That's good to hear."

During that ridiculous exchange, Paul realized Huber knew everything. Normally, the man would never go out of his way to say he was fine.

…I can't believe this.

"Hey, Huber."

"What is it?"

"Um…well…"

"Hey, Paul."

"…What?"

"It wasn't a mistake in your design, so don't worry about it."

He hit him right where it hurt.

And before he could say anything back, Huber spoke again.

"Don't say you're sorry."

"But…"

"Shut up. During the launch, I heard one of the launch pad's connection hooks scrape along the external plating. It looks like that crack split open due to the air pressure. It was the quality of your design that kept the entire ship from blowing apart."

"…"

"But I can't reenter the atmosphere with the plating like this. The heat of the atmospheric friction would get in the hole and fry me. I eat a whole roast turkey every year on *Weihnachts*, so this is probably them getting back at me."

"Hey, Huber."

"Hm?"

"What are you going to do now?"

Silence fell after that question.

"That's a good question."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'm really not sure what to say. …Oh! I can see the moon out the window. It's so big."

"The moon?"

"Yeah, the moon. I feel like I could reach out and touch it."

His tone was a mixture of confusion and joy and Paul knew very well that was the tone his friend got when he was excited.

Paul smiled bitterly at the odd atmosphere that stuck with his friend even in this emergency.

He then placed a hand over the mic and spoke to a nearby technician.

"Huber has a wife and kid. Call them here and hurry."

Part 3

An hour passed.

Huber's spaceship, the Wilhelm 2, was in a dire situation. They had discovered the oxygen was leaking from the damaged part of the ship.

All of the control room's equipment was linked to the ship's gauges via radio. According to them, the remaining oxygen would not even last ten minutes.

Bad news had a way of continuing.

Huber's wife and child had not been in the audience for the rocket launch. Their reserved seats had been empty.

They had called the house, but a servant had answered and said the wife had brought her child to a *Weihnachts* festival. She was apparently buying ingredients for a feast to celebrate her husband's return.

She had said she would return by nightfall.

It had likely been her trust in Huber's safety that had led his wife to not watch from the launch area.

No one said anything in response. Most likely, the wife would not learn of her husband's death until she returned home.

There was nothing they could do. All that remained was cleanup work.

And during that hour, they had learned another fact.

The Wilhelm II had apparently been caught in lunar orbit.

It was weak, but the moon had a gravitational pull too. It naturally had a gravitational field like the earth and it could keep a satellite in orbit.

Huber's spaceship had become a satellite of the moon which was itself a satellite of the earth.

If ironies like that continued, it was going to be quite an unpleasant *Weihnachts* indeed.

Part 4

"Honestly, you're no help at all."

"Ha ha ha. Well, I am kind of far away at the moment."

Huber's laugh was wrapped in blatant fatigue, which surprised Paul.

"Are you okay?"

"Don't worry about it, Paul. I don't have much time left, right? So let me speak some."

"Sure."

"Listen. I'm gonna say something profound, so make sure you write it down."

"Hey."

"What?"

"You always did like unfunny jokes."

"Shut up. Now, are you listening?"

"Wait just a second."

Paul pulled a pen from his work outfit and realized how terribly out of place the mood was.

He was about to write down his friend's last words.

That thought suddenly welled up inside him and he spoke in an attempt to endure it.

"Hey, Huber."

"What is it?"

"Make it something cheerful."

"Ha ha ha. I will. …So are you listening?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then. Well, there's something an adventurer like me is supposed to do."

"And what's that?"

"Find treasure."

Paul frowned at that.

"Treasure?"

"Yeah, you heard me. Treasure."

"But…"

"There's some here."

"What?"

Huber answered Paul's question with an air of false ignorance.

"I can't quite explain it. Maybe I should keep it as my own personal secret. But whoever comes here next will probably notice this treasure."

Paul thought it was a joke.

…Treasure? Is he hallucinating from oxygen deprivation?

"Hey, Huber."

"Shut up and listen. I'm about to say something important."

"…Fine."

Paul grudgingly agreed and listened to Huber clear his throat. It sounded somehow painful, so the oxygen was likely growing thin.

Paul squeezed the pen in his hand as Huber's voice filled the control room.

"Now, then. When people first began rowing out to sea, there had to have been people like me who never came back. But they all must have had the same thing in their hearts: the curiosity to see what no one has ever seen before and the ambition to go farther than anyone ever has before. Let's just say that I too did this because I felt like there was a treasure out there."

When Huber exhaled, it was a horribly rough sound.

Knowing what that meant, Paul squeezed the pen even harder as it raced along the paper.

He took a breath. He had not finished copying down the previous comment, but he sensed his friend about to speak again.

"Huber, wait a second."

The other man spoke his own words without replying.

"I have something to tell all of the people clinging to the surface of the earth. I have – without a doubt – made it farther than anyone else."

The voice coming from the speakers dropped unpleasantly. Something gave Paul a very bad feeling.

His hand suddenly stopped.

He felt an odd uneasiness. He felt like something he had been waiting for had approached all at once.

And he called out to stop it.

"Listen, Huber. Can you hear me? You still have time, so speak slowly!"

But the voice did not stop.

"That alone would've been enough, but I found my life's greatest treasure from inside this mechanical box."

Paul realized his friend was trying to adorn his own demise.

He panicked and called out.

"Hey! Don't think of this as the end! There's still so much you have to do! Don't give up!"

Huber still did not reply. After a pause, his quiet voice returned.

"I think I'll go to sleep while floating in space with this ultimate treasure and dreaming of someone someday coming here to find what I found."

…*Sleep? Sleep!?*

He was not actually talking about going to sleep.

He was talking about his final rest.

"Huber! Hey! Listen! Quit trying to make yourself look good!"

"I'll pray for my family's happiness from up here higher than heaven. And…"

His next words would be his last.

"Hey! Huber! We'll go save you! Just wait there! So…so don't end this!"

A small breath that resembled a laugh came from the speakers, but the breath transformed into words.

"Thanks, all of you."

"Hey!"

Paul heard a dull sound in his hand. The pen had broken and black ink wet his thick fingers.

He used that hand to grab the mic.

"Huber! I will go get you from there! I swear it! I won't let my ship become a coffin! Just wait! …Just wait there!"

The other man did not reply. Only silence escaped the speakers and they all knew what that silence meant.

"Dammit! Dammit! Goddammit!"

Afterwards, a single man cried as so many people listened.

Part 5

Forty minutes later, the spaceship's carbon dioxide reached its maximum density and began to reduce. Two hours later, both the carbon dioxide and oxygen reached zero. In other words, it was a vacuum.

Another five hours later, the Wilhelm 2 reached lunar orbit as predicted and it began a semi-permanent orbit there.

After the accident was made public, astronomers began referring to the Wilhelm 2 orbiting the moon as Huber's Treasure Island.

There were a number of theories as to where that name came from, but the most likely one said it was a reference to Huber's final words about a treasure.

At the time, what had people thought when they looked through their telescopes and saw that artificial satellite orbiting the moon?

From then, many different nations gave up on reaching space. Germany had lost a war and yet possessed the world's most advanced ultra-high altitude technology, including rocket propulsion engineering.

Nevertheless, they had failed.

For that reason, the world realized they were too inexperienced and so gave up on space.

That was the exact opposite of what Huber had hoped for.

And from there, the story shifts fifteen years into the future.

Chapter 1: The Legend Activates

Part 1

12/20/1935

It was night and the moon was hidden by the clouds.

The wind was strong and it was more than just a winter wind. This wind was filled with the chill of high altitude.

This was the deck of the Bladlikburg, an aerial aircraft carrier of the German air force.

The metal deck was large enough for a track meet and several people stood on the front. The men all wore military uniforms and they formed a half circle.

A tall soldier stood in the center of their formation.

He appeared to be the commander and he was wrapped in a tougher and icier atmosphere than the surrounding soldiers.

He stared straight forward to the edge of the deck inside the half-circle formation. Their prey stood there.

That prey was a young man in a lab coat. His pure white clothing seemed to glow in the darkness.

His long black hair was tied back and the bottom of his coat danced in the wind.

The commander spoke to him.

"Are you sure you will not hand over your information on the dp-XXX, Walter?"

The voice rang loudly even in the sky and the young man named Walter brought a hand to his head and showed off a bitter smile.

"I'm really not sure what to do here." His far too cheerful voice also rang loudly. "You promised us we could hold an experimental space launch if we built a powerful engine, didn't you? So how did things get like this exactly?"

"That engine is too dangerous. That is all."

Walter's bitter smile transformed into a laugh.

"Ha ha ha. Now you're just being silly, Oscar. Just say the military wants the tech for themselves. It's not nice to lie."

"You are the one being silly. You do not honestly think you can reach space with that engine, do you?"

"With just one, probably not. You'd need to put in at least three of them."

Oscar looked the other man in the eye when he heard that.

"I saw the experiment. When two of those engines are used together, they interfere with each other and refuse to function!"

"That's because of all the fine-tuning we did to make sure the moonlight wouldn't mess with them. But even one of them produces as much energy as five of the current engines. That's why the military wants them, isn't it?"

In the thirties, the military…no, the entire world used spirit engines that used spirit stones.

Spirit stones were a stone made from crystallized ether.

Ether was the element that made up all things, including space itself. Long ago, people had believed in the four classical elements, but research in the late eighteenth century had revealed that there was only a single basic element.

Spirit engines used spirit stones to draw out energy.

Emblems that determined the arrangement of ether were carved into the engines. When ether flowed from the spirit stones, it would travel through the grooves which would determine its form . Ether that touched a fire emblem would become fire.

But even though spirit engines could create fire, water, thunder, and wind, they also had a massive flaw.

Spirit stones would resonate with the light of the moon and their output would be sent out of control. Enough machines had lost control during nights with strong moonlight that night activities had been banned during the previous great war.

It was not known why they were so affected by moonlight. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars had thrown in the towel and simply declared it a “law of nature”.

Ever since, spirit engines were only used outside of the moonlight because no one had discovered a method of avoiding that mysterious law.

The military had simply thought Walter’s group was creating a new design for that same type of engine.

Oscar wrinkled his brow before speaking.

“And who do you think will allow you to foolishly try to reach space?”

“Don’t be stupid. You don’t need anyone’s permission to transcend the sky.”

“Why are you so intent on defying us?”

Walter uncrossed his arms and exaggeratedly placed a hand on his forehead.

“Why, you ask?”

“…”

“Well, you see…”

“…”

"My burning spirit of justice won't allow me to hand it over to the military. Ha ha ha."

The soldier standing next to Oscar looked up at his commander.

"Can I fill him with lead?"

"No, that is just the sort of man he is. Be patient."

Oscar took a step forward.

"You are young and you are rushing things, Walter. If you leave the dp-XXX with the military, you will receive even more funding and all the technology you need to reach space. Why not wait until then?"

"You really are dumb. If I have to hand it over to the military, I might as well patent it and sell it to America. I'd make enough money to live the rest of my life in luxury."

"America!?" shouted Oscar. "We need that engine for our nation!"

Walter stared right back at the man.

"Our nation, huh?"

He was no longer smiling.

He stuck his hands in his lab coat's pockets, raised his shoulders a little, and looked up into Oscar's eyes.

"You really do say some ridiculous things."

Part 2

Twenty years before, Oscar had returned alive from the front lines of the previous great war. The nation he had returned to had been just as exhausted as him.

Ever since, he had dedicated his life to rebuilding his nation as a soldier. Even now that he had a wife and daughter, that had not changed.

And that was why he glared at the young man before him.

"*I* am the one saying ridiculous things?"

His emphasized word pushed back at Walter's gaze.

"That would be you. You have no idea if your idea will work, so why not put that technology to more efficient use!?"

"We didn't create the dp-XXX for something so boring."

Walter took a step back and stood on the cliff-like edge of the deck.

With nowhere left to go, he spoke slowly and clearly.

"We care more about what we want to do than about anything as ridiculous as a nation or the military."

That was a way of thinking that Oscar could never understand. For better or for worse, he was an excellent soldier and an adult.

Everyone had something that ran counter to their nature.

…*I see.*

He replied to those words by announcing his decision.

"Negotiations have failed."

"Wow, you sure can make up your mind nicely, Oscar."

Oscar formed a bitter smile only on his lips.

"I have made up my mind. I will deal with you here."

"Hmm. You can act all cool if you want…"

"What?"

"But next time you let someone on your ship, you should probably check what they're carrying with them."

With that, Walter pulled something from his lab coat's right pocket.

He held what looked like a small black communicator.

"I managed to buy enough time."

The young man's line was accompanied by an urgent announcement behind Oscar and the other soldiers.

"Emergency! Emergency! Addressing all ships! An unidentified craft is approaching from five o'clock! It is moving extremely quickly!"

Oscar turned toward the deck speaker producing the voice.

…*What is approaching?*

As if to answer that question, the hatch onto the deck opened and a young officer ran out.

The young man looked well-bred and wore his uniform impeccably.

"Major General Oscar!" he shouted while holding his cap in place. "Please hurry back inside!"

The young officer's blue eyes faced Walter instead of Oscar.

"The dp-XXX has destroyed the Wagner Laboratory and is headed this way! We will be sending out the Eisen Soldat, so please leave the deck! This will be a dogfight!"

That statement was important. Knowing what it meant, Oscar turned toward Walter.

Walter gave a quiet smile toward the young officer standing next to Oscar.

"Sounds like you have it rough, Mayer. Military work is restricting, isn't it?"

"Walter!" shouted the young officer named Mayer even as he tried to catch his breath. "A-are you picking a fight with the military!?"

"Wow, you're asking that too? It was all of you that started the fight here. All I did was virtuously and kindly reject your offer."

"But you did it in a cruel and over-the-top way, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but whoever picked the fight, it's starting after everything's already settled. And in that case…how should I put it ? Well, if you view it like a financial deal…"

He took a breath.

"You're gonna be in the red."

Suddenly, the deck shook as if it had sunk down.

Their knees threatened to collapse underneath them as the shaking continued three more times. Light resembling sparks scattered down below the deck.

Eisen Soldat, the fighter craft attached to the aerial aircraft carrier's port side, had been sent out.

The sparks were the light produced when the craft were launched from their connectors. To provide initial velocity, they were fired out liked bullets using spirit gunpowder.

After a moment's delay, the ship shook four more times as the craft on the starboard side were launched.

A ship-wide announcement reached the deck.

"Fighter craft launch complete. Unit 1 will reach the unidentified ship in seventy-one seconds! Unit 2 will be in position to protect our airspace in thirty-five seconds! All hands…"

Oscar frowned at that announcement and Mayer shouted out.

"Fall back! And tell those down below that this is not an unidentified ship! It is an enemy ship!"

"Y-yes, sir!"

Mayer turned to Walter without bothering to watch the soldiers run off.

"Do you think you've won!?"

"The unidentified ship is not responding to our communications!" continued the announcement. "It is maintaining its direct course! The fighter craft are moving to intercept! …It's fast! This is twelve seconds sooner than predicted!"

That was the signal.

The deck's lights all lit and faint light leaked from below the deck as well.

Four lights could be seen ascending into the night sky from below, two on each side. They were the four craft tasked with protecting the Bladlikburg.

An alarm blared.

"Unit 1 has made contact!"

The announcement filling the night sky briefly stopped.

The soldiers slowly backed away and frowned. Oscar realized Walter was the only one smiling in that tense atmosphere.

…Is he convinced he can defeat the military?

He received an answer an instant later.

"Three of the fighter craft were destroyed! The enemy ship…is undamaged! At this rate…It will collide with us!"

The announcement ended there.

The wind could not even shake the Bladlikburg, but it seemed to hop up now.

It was enough of a tremor to send everyone aboard a little airborne. A great rumbling accompanied it. If any one of them had been calm enough to think, they would have realized the impact came from the shockwave of something smashing the sound barrier.

The soldiers on the deck fell to the metal floor as if they had tripped. Only two people remained standing: Oscar and…

"Walter!"

As if pushed by that shout, Walter jumped backwards. He did not hesitate to leap from the deck.

An afterimage of his white lab coat remained in the empty night .

The Bladlikburg's shaking settled down and Oscar ran forward.

"It is unknown if the approaching enemy ship intends to attack! Everyone evacuate the deck! I repeat…"

As the commander, he ignored that command and reached the point Walter had jumped from.

And that was when something slowly ascended.

Part 3

"What is this!?"

It was a strange ship shaped like a sword.

It was over ten meters wide, about six meters tall, and at least twenty-five meters long. It was nearly four times the size of traditional aircraft.

However, it did not have the armor that aircraft used to reduce air resistance. The engine, power transfer pipes, and moving parts were all left exposed. It almost looked like a giant mass of metal organs.

It had no main wings. Instead, it had a giant tail shaped like an arch bridge.

The top and bottom of the ship both had two spherical field emitters. Of those, the two on the front were emitting swords of light as long as the ship itself. Those were close-quarters divine spell weapons known as Schwert.

A divine spell weapon was a weapon that used an engine to construct solid objects. The power of the spirit stone was fully materialized and even fire or lightning could be made into a solid object. The Schwert was one of those and it could even slice through Kugel, a type of long-range divine spell weapon.

Dogfights primarily came down to close-range battles with those swords.

This ship had likely flown here while slicing through the intercepting Eisen Soldat in a single strike.

"This is the dp-XXX, the unprecedented aerial warship we call the Kaiserburg."

Oscar heard Walter's voice and saw the young man standing the cockpit-like box in the center of the ship.

"What do you think? Pretty cool, isn't it?"

Oscar did not agree, but he was shocked by a certain fact.

The ship before him was not producing any flames from its spirit engine rocket or jets.

…Is it floating?

The ship they called the dp-XXX was floating without sullying the dark night.

Machines could be made to float in the air. A giant ship like the Bladlikburg had enough surface area to carve the floating emblems , but the dp-XXX was not that large. It was also not equipped with the jet an aircraft needed for propulsion.

It was truly an unprecedented ship.

…Impossible.

Oscar saw Walter crouch down and open the hatch. The young man glanced back at him for just a moment.

"Are you going to keep this pointless fight going?"

"What do you mean!?"

"You still haven't caught on? If you get in our way, you might end up dead."

"Is going to space that important?"

The young man did not reply. He only smiled.

"Unit 2 is approaching the enemy!"

After that announcement, Walter jumped inside the Kaiserburg and Oscar moved back while clicking his tongue.

At the same time, the Kaiserburg's Schwert rotated to face outward.

"…!"

Oscar lowered his head slightly as the two curves of light sliced apart the approaching Kugel that the attacking Eisen Soldat had fired.

Four sounds of shattering glass filled the air.

Walter shut the hatch after himself and the Kaiserburg moved backwards.

After putting some distance between itself and the Bladlikburg, it showed its belly and quickly ascended.

Oscar tightly clenched his teeth as he looked up at it and heard great roars from either side.

The noise came from the Eisen Soldat. The rear-wing craft had a fairly round nose, so they were generally cross-shaped. They were the standard air force craft and each one had two spirit engine rockets.

They were fast and their contrails remained in the night sky behind them.

The four ascended in pursuit of the Kaiserburg.

Their target fled into the clouds that hid the moon.

Needless to say, the clouds would not be enough for these soldiers to lose it.

…What is he planning to do?

Oscar's thoughts tested the Kaiserburg and the ship responded.

Light formed in the clouds floating in the darkness. That light quickly grew and tore through the clouds like a ripple.

Finally, something flew from the center of the ripple with a few explosive flames wrapped around it.

It was a giant comet.

"…!"

A spear of light trailing a long tail blew away the clouds and flew onward even with the moonlight washing over it.

Oscar knew what that was. It was a weapon the military had only recently managed to implement.

"A Panzer Emblem."

All of the emblems engraved in an aircraft's external paneling were activated to transform the craft itself into a Kugel. It was a ramming weapon that did not belong on an aircraft.

The Soldat pursuing the Kaiserburg scattered when the Panzer Emblem struck them.

Four explosions reverberated in Oscar's gut.

"He got us."

Oscar now knew where Walter's confidence had come from.

…In other words, modern weapons are no match for you, is that it?

That thought made him shudder.

He knew very well how frightening the advancement of weapons could be. During the previous great war, tanks and aircraft had been used for the first time and they had remarkably increased the number of deaths. And the dp-XXX's abilities easily surpassed those technologies.

On top of that, there were still several unknowns concerning the dp-XXX.

It almost certainly had further abilities.

With that in mind, he sighed.

"I shouldn't be surprised. Otherwise, he would never think of going to space in an incomplete ship."

He lowered his gaze a bit.

The Kaiserburg had already vanished from view, but he could predict its destination from the direction into which it had torn through the sky.

"Berlin!"

Chapter 2: The Legend Takes Off

Part 1

12/21/1935

Berlin was a city of machines and stone. Anyone walking through its streets was bound to see something inorganic.

However, even Berlin had areas of green. In southeast Berlin, a one kilometer forest stood out like a sore thumb in the middle of the modern city.

The forest was primarily made up of conifer trees. It was December, so the forest of tall cedars was cold.

The midday sun washed over that forest which hid a large pond .

The forest was dark and somewhat misty, but sunlight filled a straight line through it. That line was a stone-paved road. It was a walking path, but not a single dried leaf sat on it. It was a private road.

Two people rode horses down that road and four white breaths floated in the air.

The person on the front horse was a tall girl who wore a skirt in the saddle. The person on the horse behind hers was an elderly man in a thick coat.

A delicate and tense atmosphere surrounded the two of them.

The man's square face was pointed straight forward.

He looked at the girl's back where her short-cut blonde hair reached the collar of her thin coat.

He spoke hesitantly toward that back.

"Hey, Else. How has university been going lately? Are your studies going well?"

She did not reply, but he continued regardless.

"When I was your age, the war was drawing close, so there was quite a commotion everywhere. Back then, you couldn't study even if you wanted to. And that is why-…"

"That's why you started making weapons and got rich, right?"

The back in front of him finally spoke.

The man briefly frowned at being interrupted, but…

"But, Else, I now have plenty of leeway in life, so I can think about my daughter and her future."

"In other words, you want to shove me into the university and have me study until I cry."

"Else."

"What?"

"Face people when you speak to them!"

"Y'know, dad."

"Hm?"

"I am not in a good mood. I have a terrible look in my eyes, so are you sure you want me looking at you?"

Her tone was devoid of all emotion.

The man subconsciously pulled on the reins to slow his horse a step.

Once he noticed, he frantically spoke up.

"B-but, Else, you are already twenty and you still haven't found someone to marry."

"There you go again treating women like baby-making machines."

Else gave an exaggerated shrug while still holding the reins.

"I just hate restrictions like that."

"Else, a girl should not say she hates things."

"I loathe them."

"That is not any better!"

"Shut up. You always talk about studying and marriage. You didn't have this house and all its land to begin with. You may have made a lot of money selling weapons, but why do *I* have to do those things for something like this?"

"It is for your own good!"

"Now that I don't understand. I mean, I do like this forest and the pond over there, but I could always go to a normal park and-… "

She stopped her horse and he followed suit.

"What is it, Else?"

She did not turn around. Instead, she looked up a little.

"…?"

He did the same and noticed a single trail of smoke rising from the forest.

The white smoke stood out in the clear winter sky.

"That's a fire," he muttered to himself.

Suddenly, Else's horse began to run straight toward the smoke.

"Ah! Wait! Else!"

He looked around, unsure whether to head back to the mansion to get word out about the fire or to pursue Else.

As a father, he chose the latter.

He was delayed, but he had his horse run after her. He could see her in the distance ahead and he noticed her pull a rod-like object from below her coat.

Seeing that left him speechless.

What initially looked like a rod was a black submachine gun. It was the newest model of the MP18, a masterwork used by both police and vigilantes.

"She swiped one from the storeroom again!"

His daughter was too far up ahead to hear his groaning words.

Else sped up her horse while resting the five kilogram submachine gun on her shoulder with slight difficulty.

The man pursued and the eight hooves raced across the stone-pavement.

Part 2

When surrounded by the blue sky, a beautiful pond, and a black cedar forest at midday, preparing a pleasant lunch was the only option.

The pleasant aroma hanging in the air only increased that desire . That aroma was of cooking oil.

A young man wearing a lab coat over work clothes sat on the sunny edge of the pond. He currently wore a green apron over the rest of his outfit.

It was Walter.

He sat in front of a fire made by gathering dry wood and a nice sound and smell came from the frying pan in his hand.

He had gathered some nearby stones as a stove, but it was not all that effective. The heat of the fire could not be reaching the frying pan very well, but the smell suggested he was actually cooking proper food.

“That should do it.”

He looked over his shoulder.

“Professor, food’s ready.”

A giant mass of metal floated behind him. It was the dp-XXX or Kaiserburg. The collection of solid machinery and metal pipes was hovering about a meter off the ground.

The man referred to as “professor” was on top of it.

Only the back of his work outfit could be seen from Walter’s position because the man was clinging to the top of the Kaiserburg as if crawling.

"Professor. Food."

The man still did not reply.

The professor was lost in his work. He had removed one of the Kaiserburg's outer panels and was fiddling around within the machine while almost climbing inside.

"Hm."

Walter nodded, stuck his empty hand in his lab coat's pocket, pulled out a small black communicator, and switched it on.

"Kaiserburg, shake back and forth a little."

With a slight noise, the ship in front of him shook its head. And quickly.

This panicked the professor clinging to it.

"Whoooaaa! Walter! D-d-d-don't move this thing!"

"Want to eat something?"

"I-I-I-I'm working right now!"

"Is that so? Then maybe I should have it shake even harder."

"F-fine, just stop this thing!"

"Are you sure? I feel like having a little more fun."

"Just stop it! I'll finish up, so stop it!"

"That's a shame. …Kaiserburg, stop."

The ship's shaking abruptly stopped and the professor sighed while still clinging to it.

Walter placed the frying pan's contents on a large plate sitting on the ground.

Those contents were bratwurst and pommes frites. The trick to making the pommes frites was to use the oil produced when cooking the flavored wurst.

After checking to make sure it was all done, Walter stood up.

At that exact moment, he heard a metallic sound and felt like his hand almost flew off. A shock had run through the frying pan as if someone had kicked it.

"…Eh?"

He fixed his grip on it and looked at it. There was a fingertip-sized hole in the bottom of the frying pan and he could see straight through it.

"What is it?" asked the professor.

"This is a little strange from a physics perspective, but a hole suddenly appeared in this thing."

"That's because you haggled down the price of an already cheap pan."

The professor's explanation did not explain much of anything and he wiped his dirty hands on the stomach of his work outfit. He had the plumpness common among elderly men, but he must have had a decent frame because he still looked plenty solid.

"It might be a new form of metal fatigue."

"But even it was cheap, I'd grown accustomed to this thing."

Walter looked up and saw the professor sigh, pull a cigarette from his pocket, and place it in his mouth.

As soon as he did, Walter heard a light bursting sound and the cigarette flew from the professor's mouth.

"…!"

Before the man could turn around with just the filter in his mouth, Walter asked a question.

"So did you haggle down the price of some already cheap cigarettes?"

That was when a sharp voice reached them.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing at our home!?"

It was a female voice and Walter turned toward the forest it came from.

Part 3

Else was unsure what to do about the object before her eyes or the man standing in front of it.

A young man wore a lab coat and apron over a work outfit and a giant mixture of metal pipes and panels sat behind him. Also, a plump elderly man in a work outfit stood on top of the machine.

…Who are they?

She could not deny that an exasperated look appeared on her lips as she aimed her submachine gun at them.

Even she thought the look in her eyes was harsh, but she felt that look gave her even more strength as she asked a question.

"What are you two doing?"

The young man in an apron tilted his head and asked a question of his own.

"And what are you doing here, lovely little lady?"

"Cut the flattery. What are you doing at our home?"

"This is your home? Do you live in the woods?"

"Do you *want* me to shoot you?"

"No, no. That sounds painful."

"Then answer me. I really will shoot you next time."

He looked down at the frying pan in his hand.

"Um… Didn't you already shoot at us?"

"The first shot was practice, the second was a warning, and the next one will be for real."

This much was no more than a greeting.

The young man must have caught on because he smiled and scratched at his head.

"Hmm. I feel like you're skipping quite a few steps here. Could you explain how we ended up in this situation?"

"Y'know, you're the ones making this so complicated. What is that machine behind you?"

"Oh, this thing? It's a secret weapon of the military."

He casually dropped a bombshell of a statement.

Else lowered the submachine gun without thinking and looked at the young man without using the sight.

"A secret weapon?"

"Yep. The military told us to hand it over after we built it, so we ran off."

"The military? Then this-…?"

She looked up at the mechanical mass behind the young man and her eyes met with the man standing on top of it.

She lowered her head a bit on reflex.

…I think I've seen him somewhere before.

To check on that, she spoke to the young man in front of her.

"Who are you two?"

"I'm Walter, second-in-command of the Wagner Laboratory. The ship behind me is the dp-XXX Kaiserburg that was built there and the guy on top of it is the lab head, Paul Wagner."

She recognized the laboratory name and the older man's name.

"I've heard of you! You taught emblem technology at my university until two years ago!"

The professor laughed on top of the Kaiserburg.

"Oh? So you're a student at the University of Berlin?"

Else nodded and looked back and forth between Paul and Walter.

"And I read in the newspaper that there was a commotion at the Wagner Laboratory and the lab head and second-in-command went missing."

"Missing? Oh, man. What do I do if my relatives put in a search request?"

"*That's* what you're worried about!? What are famous people like you doing here?"

"Well, we used this new experimental weapon, but its power dropped like a rock and it malfunctioned. We decided it needed repairs and we happened to spot the perfect place to hide it down below."

"The perfect place to hide it, huh?"

"Yeah, sorry about that. We thought it was a park."

"Fine, whatever. …More importantly, can that machine really fly?"

"Yeah, it can even fly to space."

She frowned at that.

"Sorry, but I seriously doubt that. You just said it malfunctioned , didn't you?"

"No, no. It can make it. It was made to reach space."

She sensed confidence in Walter's fixation on the word "space".

"Hey…"

"Yes?"

"When you say space, you mean outer space, right?"

"That's right."

"Wait. Are you serious? No one has ever successfully done that before."

"It'll be fine. As long as this thing grows properly, it can go anywhere."

One word from his explanation did not fit, so she asked to make sure she had heard right.

"Grows?"

"Yeah, isn't that right, professor?"

Paul's only response was a meaningful smile.

Realizing that smile was filled with confidence, Else decided they were serious. She also remembered something that had happened in the past.

"But why are you keeping your attempt hidden? Before – you know, when that manned rocket failed – the military helped out and everyone was talking about it."

She saw Paul's expression stiffen at that and he spoke before Walter could say anything.

"We would rather not rely on the military. We want to reach space on our own while putting ourselves first."

"That sounds childish."

"Shut up. I've always been like that."

Else smiled bitterly at the elderly man's statement. She could somehow understand that way of thinking.

…*That must be nice.*

That thought softened her expression.

"I see. So you're just doing it as a hobby."

"More or less. …Now, who are you?"

"Are you familiar with the Breuer Company that sells weapons?"

Walter tilted his head, but Paul looked up.

"I am. They were building a giant mansion in Berlin about when I quit the military."

"That's where you are now. I'm the president's only daughter."

"Wait! Else!"

A low voice reached them as a man on a horse burst from the forest to the side.

Else turned back to the two men.

"And that's my father, Gaston," she said more quietly.

"Else! Who are those people! And what is that giant machine!?"

"Shut up!" she shouted without turning around. "They're criminals on the run from the military because they stole a secret ship!"

Gaston had clearly been planning to shout something back, but that explanation drained all color from his face. Else nodded, satisfied in the influence of her words. She could be cruel.

"W-wait! Why would people like that be-…"

"I said shut up. Obviously their ship malfunctioned and they crashed here."

"I'm not sure that counts as 'obviously'."

"Don't nitpick my wording. And either way, they aren't bad people! Would bad people sit around leisurely cooking bratwurst?"

"I don't think that's the issue here."

"Who cares if it is? We're not opposed to the military, but we have nothing against these two either. Besides, no respectable person would sell someone out to the military."

She knew her father was easily swayed by words like that. He seemed reluctant to let his daughter know he had to make nice to the military as a weapons dealer.

Even if his job required it, that was a weakness of his, so he fell silent when she brought it up. She felt a little bad for having done so.

"Now, then."

She took a breath and spoke to the two behind her.

"You two, come to our place. You'll tell us some interesting stories, won't you?"

Part 4

Mayer answered the phone instead of Oscar who had gone to the remains of the Wagner Laboratory.

As Oscar's aide, looking after the place in his absence was a legitimate part of Mayer's job. He had to do his best to preserve his commander's good name.

He looked out the window as he picked up the receiver, but it had already grown dark. The glass reflected his slightly tense face.

He lowered his gaze and spoke into the receiver.

"Yes, this is Mayer Schrier speaking for Major General Oscar Mirildorf."

"Oh, Lieutenant Mayer? This is Gaston of the Breuer Company. "

He recognized the voice. This was the president of the weapons dealer that manufactured the air force's aircraft and sold them firearms. His was the top company in the industry, but he seemed like a fairly sociable person.

Mayer lowered his head toward the phone without thinking.

"Thank you for calling. What do you need at this hour?"

"Have you read today's newspaper?"

"The newspaper? I skimmed through it. What about it?"

"I heard this from someone I know, but…"

Gaston's tone dropped and Mayer realized it would be crass to ask just who that "someone" was. Some important incident had to be happening around this man.

Mayer allowed him to keep it a secret.

"Go ahead. We are known for keeping secrets."

"I am well aware. …Anyway, from what I've heard, Major General Oscar's unit is pursuing some sort of incident."

"…"

Mayer's silence acted as an answer and the other man seemed to pick up on what this meant.

"Well, based on the assumption that you are, I believe what you are looking for is on my land."

"Is that so?"

"And it is accompanied by two people."

…*I see.*

Mayer realized what exactly was going on, so he spoke quickly.

"Understood. That has nothing to do with us, but it may be of interest to someone. I will track them down and contact them, so please invite those two people in as a guest for the next few days."

"Understood. I will."

"Sorry about the trouble."

"No, not at all. …And one other thing."

"Yes?"

"If something happens, I would prefer if you did not tell my family that I was the one to call you. Could you keep that a secret?"

"Eh? Yes, we can…but why? If these guests turn out to be important, you would be richly rewarded."

"No, I'd much rather not be. …And I don't need any more riches anyway."

Mayer detected hesitation in the man's voice, but there was no need to look into it further.

"I see. Then if it comes to it, we will reward you in another way."

"Thank you very much. And I hope you will continue to use our products in the future."

The man's tone completely changed in an instant.

…That's a merchant for you.

With that thought, Mayer lowered his head toward the telephone again.

"Thank you very much."

"No, thank you. …And please come quickly."

With that, he hung up.

Mayer held his breath as he set down the receiver and he looked out the window again.

He was on the fifth and highest floor of Berlin's air force base, so he could see the nightscape of Berlin through the glass.

The Breuer home was about eight kilometers southeast of the base.

"Is that you, Walter, teacher?"

His expression grew even tenser as he muttered that question.

He wanted to run out there right away to check, but Oscar had yet to return and he was too young to give orders of his own.

"I can't believe this."

His voice sounded troubled and yet somehow happy.

"Why are those two like that?"

His bitterly smiling eyes stared out into the night.

Somewhere in those scattered specks of light were the people he sought.

Chapter 3: The Legend Accelerates

Part 1

12/23/1935

It was the day before Weihnachtsabend.

The flow of happy people could be seen even in the shopping district along Mehring Street which continued south from Mehringplatz, a famous plaza in Berlin. Many of them were preparing to take time off of work and celebrate Weihnachts with their families. It was a crowded area.

A bicycle raced along the roads while avoiding those crowded areas. It was moving quite quickly.

Walter wore his lab coat as he controlled the bicycle and Else stood on the back luggage area.

They were on their way back from the national library in the University of Berlin.

They had tried to check out an encyclopedia of ancient emblems , but the receptionist had said encyclopedias could not be checked out. Else had been forced to secretly throw the book out the window to Walter who waited outside.

In other words, they had stolen it.

Incidentally, Else had been the one to suggest it and Walter had agreed.

The encyclopedia was necessary to fix the Kaiserburg's malfunction.

They had spent the entire previous day working out the cause.

Simply put, the engine's output was too high and the emergency shutoff had activated.

If they continued running it like that, the engine would burn out and never work again. This malfunction was the result of giving the ship an unfinished and powerful engine, so they needed to carve in the proper output control emblem.

Else had stuck with Walter and Paul for the day it took them to realize that and she had gotten to see the inside of the Kaiserburg and even its engines.

The first surprise had been that the three cylindrical engines on the back and wings were sealed. That meant the ship flew without emitting any kind of jet.

"To put it simply, it manipulates gravity to fly. Unlike the previous engine designs, it provides a massive amount of energy and doesn't need to create fire or wind using simple emblems. It instead uses the gravity techniques of the powerful divine spell users in ancient times."

As he explained that, Walter had opened the engine's outer paneling.

Inside were the guts made of metal pipes and gauges.

Else had seen something truly unexpected in the center.

"A spirit stone!"

The spirit stone had been large enough to wrap ones arms around and it had emitted a faint light in its place as a component.

Spirit stones were normally used as fuel, not as a component. A fighter craft could fly for six hundred hours using a standard fingertip-sized spirit stone mined from a vein of spirit stones. The average yearly flight time for military fighter craft was only five hundred hours.

What Else had seen was absurdly large and it had detailed emblems carved into its surface.

"What is this?"

"It's a new type of engine that has developed beyond the standard spirit engine. We call it an emblem engine."

"Where did you find such a huge spirit stone? …It isn't a fake, is it?"

"Of course not. It was inside a crater in the southern mountains. On earth, a spirit stone's field is discharged into the air, so we

searched for a fresh stone that had come from outside. And since it was so big, we could carve emblems into it like a normal component."

Wood could be burned more efficiently if it was first turned to charcoal instead of being burned as is. Similarly, ether produced greater power as a crystallized spirit stone than when it simply floated through empty space.

So what if an engine was created from that crystal?

"The engine itself absorbs ether from the surrounding space to produce its great power. That's why the Kaiserburg doesn't include a spirit stone for fuel."

"You mean it can keep moving forever without refueling?"

"That's right."

He had readily affirmed that ridiculous idea.

The ultra-high power aerial ship could fly indefinitely without refueling. Of course it had been a military secret.

"Well? Surprised?"

The young man had smiled as he asked that.

That had been yesterday.

Part 2

"It's been two years since I visited Berlin, but it hasn't changed at all."

Walter sounded completely carefree as he pedaled the bicycle.

Else asked him a question and held down her blowing skirt.

"Um, did you graduate from the University of Berlin? …If so, do you think we ever saw each other somewhere before?"

"Hard to say. I slept in the lab during university and left the country a lot in my fourth year."

"Left the country? That must be nice. …Japan or India sound like fun."

Walter's shoulders shook in laughter when he heard that.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. I just thought a girl would say she wanted to go to Paris."

"Shut up. Everyone goes there. I'd rather go somewhere interesting."

"Then you're the same as me. I can't believe this."

"Eh? Did you say something?"

She asked him to repeat himself, but he did not respond.

To fill the gap, Else asked another question.

"Hey, that old guy is the *meister* who made the spaceship Huber Talstrasse rode, isn't he?"

"Yes, but what about it?"

"When I spoke with him yesterday, I brought up that accident, didn't I?"

"Don't worry about it. Or do you want me to tell him you feel bad?"

"I can apologize for myself."

"That would be better. It'll probably be embarrassing, but do your best."

She scratched her head as he smiled at her, but she suddenly asked something else.

"I assume he's going into space for Huber's sake, but what about you, Walter?"

Why was that young man trying to go to space?

It was an obvious question for Else who had been arguing with her father about her future.

Walter gently turned back toward her.

"What if I said it was because of my curiosity to see what no one has ever seen before and my ambition to go farther than anyone ever has before? That's a favorite quote of mine."

Else sighed at that answer.

"C'mon, can't you give a proper answer? That's from Huber Talstrasse's last words, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. You know a lot about this, don't you?"

"I looked through my house's library after you said you were going to space."

"I see. Being eager to learn is a good thing. Is that how you learned about the professor, too?"

She could sense his smiling mood through the shoulders she rested her hands on and he had avoided giving her the answer she wanted.

She thought about asking again but decided against it.

…It must not be a simple enough reason to put to words.

She wanted to know that reason for her own sake.

…Do I have something like that too?

Just then, something odd passed by them.

It was an armored military bus. The inside, sides, and even roof of the rough green vehicle were covered with soldiers and they seemed to be in a hurry.

"Walter, are we in trouble? That's the military, isn't it?"

"We're fine. They won't recognize me with so many people around."

As soon as he said that, the armored bus's external speaker produced a young voice.

"Walterrrr! I found you!"

At the same time, the steel box of a vehicle came to a sudden stop.

Smoke spewed from its wheels and they produced a raw screech.

The normal car behind it could not swerve in time and crashed into it.

With a tremendous sound, the armored bus hopped upwards and knocked a few of the soldiers off of it. Chaos quickly spread through the street.

The car that had failed to stop in time skidded to the side and more cars crashed into it from behind. More and more cars piled up from behind.

The simple but lively metallic sounds continued and were joined by people's voices.

It was a quite a ruckus.

While watching the commotion from the bicycle, Else asked Walter a question.

"Didn't you just say they wouldn't recognize you?"

"Eh? Who would say something silly like that?"

"Try to be less blatant when you lie! …And look! Here they come!"

With no moving cars left, the soldiers cut across the street.

The people watching the commotion fled when they saw the soldiers charging.

The bicycle continued on and weaved between the fleeing people at a decent clip.

"Walter! Hurry!"

Suddenly, five soldiers ran in from the side, each wielding an automatic handgun.

"Get the traitors!" they shouted.

Else turned toward them from the back of the bicycle.

"Oh, shut up!"

She pulled a submachine gun from the bag on her back. The action was so natural that the running soldiers did not immediately realize what she was aiming at them.

"Waah!"

Once they did, they quickly stopped their running feet.

Seeing that, Else pulled the trigger, extended her arms, and endured the recoil.

"…!"

With a pleasant repeating sound, the sidewalk was torn apart. All five of the soldiers disgracefully jumped out of the way. She was making sure she did not hit them, but it must have been frightening from their perspective.

"Wah, wah, wah, wah, wah!"

Their screams quickly grew more distant and the bicycle accelerated.

However, it was too soon to relax. Still holding the submachine gun, she caught her breath, lowered her hips, and sat sideways on the luggage area.

"Um, Else?"

"Hm? What is it?"

"You can be pretty harsh when you need to be."

"Yeah, it happens a lot, so don't worry about it."

"Else…"

"What?"

"I think we're going to get along nicely."

His shoulders shook as he suppressed his laughter.

"Oh, we're about to enter the back alley, so we'll be turning right!"

The bicycle tilted to the right, the back wheel slid a bit, and they charged into the alley behind a store.

In the process, Else caught a quick glimpse of the soldiers still pursuing them from behind.

…This is pretty serious.

Her thoughts remained carefree even as a hint of unease entered her chest.

…What's going to happen now?

Part 3

The Kaiserburg floated unreliably in the backyard of a large white mansion.

Even in winter, the warm currents from the ocean kept Germany from growing too cold. It was also a sunny day, so the top of the metal ship was comfortably warm.

A man in a blue work outfit slept on top of that warm ship. It was Paul.

He was enjoying a pleasant nap for the first time in a long while .

He was completely relaxed after the tension of the last few days had suddenly left him entirely.

…I'm like an old man.

Suddenly, a shrill noise came from his body.

The communicator in his pocket had rung.

"…!"

He frantically sat up and pulled it out.

"Hey, it's me. What is it, Walter?"

The young man's energetic voice replied to him.

"Professor! Can you hear me!?"

"Hm? You're pretty far away, aren't you? Did something happen?"

"The military is headed your way."

"What do you mean exactly?"

"A national military unit is heavily armed and travelling to your current location. Yeah, that's definitely what's happening."

"That isn't what I meant! Keep it simple."

"The military is headed your way."

"Are you trying to pick a fight with me!?"

"Mayer and his friends are already having a party and they've caused quite a commotion. Can't you hear it?"

Sure enough, he could hear some unusual sounds from both the communicator and the forest surrounding the mansion. Most notably, gunfire and collisions.

It seemed something crazy was going on.

"Hm. So how are you doing? Is the young lady with you?"

"Yes, yes. The 'young lady' is with him, old man!"

"You seem to be doing well. And young lady, don't call me 'old man'. Call me professor. Got it?"

"Sure, sure. Then how about you stop calling me 'young lady'. I 'm already twenty, you old professor."

"Hey, Walter. Can't you do something about this foulmouthed girl?"

"Else, weren't you just saying something about apologizing?"

"Oh, damn. …Wait! This is no time to talk about that!"

"You're right, you're right. Professor, given the situation, we'll recite the emblem from here. Can you can carve it in as we do?"

Paul did not immediately understand Walter's question.

"That is completely insane," he replied.

"Don't worry, professor. You're Germany's best emblem technician, aren't you? You're the only one that can carve an emblem into stone with just a chisel these days, so how about showing off your skill?"

"Y'know..."

"You can't do it?"

The voice coming from the communicator was terribly dark and filled with disappointment.

Paul replied on reflex.

"Well, it isn't that I *can't*."

"Okay, then do it. Do it right now. Do it immediately. Got it? That settles it."

Walter's tone immediately brightened and Paul frowned.

"Fine then. Give me two minutes to prepare."

"Understood. Else will be the one reading off the emblem, so try to get along."

"Eh? Wait. I can't read an emblem."

"Emblem reading is a required course at the university, isn't it? Besides, my hands are more than full with controlling the bike."

Paul heard Else continue to protest, but he stopped listening.

He scratched his head in exasperation and stood from the Kaiserburg.

It seemed he was not going to get a relaxing nap after all.

Part 4

Six long aerial aircraft carriers floated in the sky above a sea of clouds. They were the Bladlikburg and others of the same model. Their designations were Bladlikburg Eins, Zwei, Drei, Vier, Fünf, and Sechs.

They were almost identical and were shaped like long panels. The bridge was a glass-covered basket attached on the bottom to

give a view of the area below. This was the opposite of a normal ship or aircraft, but the upper deck had to be flat so the aircraft could take off or land.

Currently, a man looked down on the sea of clouds from the front window of Eins's bridge.

It was Oscar.

He pressed the communication intercom to his ear and frowned .

"You ran across him, but he ran away? And he has entered the Breuer family's land?"

He thought about what to do and instantly made up his mind.

"Okay. You have permission to pursue. But you come up here, Mayer. Only you can properly pilot the new craft."

He took a breath.

"We cannot let them complete that ship."

And…

"The Tempelhof Airport should be closest. We will also descend , so we should arrive in less than fifteen minutes. Hurry."

After emphasizing that, he ended the communication.

…The fate of the military…no, of Germany itself is dependent on a single ship.

He smiled bitterly.

Germany had regained its economic footing in the first half of the twenties.

In the thirties, a man rumored to be a madman had taken political control. Ever since, the nation had completely ignored the disarmament promised in the Treaty of Versailles and they had encouraged military expansion.

If Germany gained the dp-XXX's technology, another great war was bound to begin. If Oscar's estimation was correct, the dp-XXX could singlehandedly destroy Air Force Division 5 aka Eisen Vogel that he commanded.

The information retrieved from the destroyed Wagner Laboratory had supported that estimation.

And if that craft flew into space, the problem would spread beyond the nation of Germany. Country after country would target the dp-XXX.

…And that will lead to a war centered on this country!

He could not allow that to happen.

The dp-XXX was an unmistakably dangerous ship.

However, he had another thought as well.

…What if we could properly use its abilities?

If so, Germany would most likely lead the world. America had invented the spirit engine and they now nearly ruled the world economy as the world's greatest automobile producer.

From that perspective, Germany needed the dp-XXX's technology.

Which view was correct?

He did not know.

Until he had seen the dp-XXX's ability for himself, he had thought they could simply destroy it. He had thought it was a threat to the country that would only make the top brass of the military happy.

But it had displayed more power than he had ever imagined. It was entirely different from the current technology and he had sensed the future in it. He had seen many new weapons on the battlefield, so he knew to trust that feeling.

It could not be allowed to exist, but it would be such a shame to lose it.

…What should we do?

He thought.

He did not have time to hesitate. The battle would begin in just a few minutes.

He knew what he had to do: keep Germany from going to war or getting drawn into a war. And for that, he had to rethink what the purpose of the military was.

A sudden thought occurred to him.

…The military is meant to protect the nation.

With that thought, he made a breakthrough.

He immediately came to a decision.

…We will hold the dp-XXX here and hide it until the time comes!

That was it. That was the only possible answer.

Strength filled his gaze and he barked orders.

"Transfer the crew of artillery aircraft carriers Zwei and Fünf to other ships! If this comes to a fight, the dp-XXX will use its Panzer Emblem. Tell them to leave nothing but a unit of men prepared to die!"

A plan formed in his mind. Most likely either Bladlikburg Zwei or Fünf would be sunk, but he would be happy if they could limit it to just that.

"Once that is complete, all ships are to descend at full speed! The battle begins!"

Part 5

The bicycle raced through the forest. The mansion was not far away now.

The noise coming from behind was their pursuers.

"They sure are persistent. Doesn't this count as trespassing?" asked Else while looking worriedly back.

"We trespassed with the Kaiserburg too."

"What you did was landing or crashing, not trespassing."

She raised her head just as they left the forest. Her vision opened up and she saw a yard the size of a plaza. There was a giant mansion beyond it and a sword-like metal ship floated in front of it.

"…!"

The Kaiserburg's nose was pointed their way.

It moved forward as if someone had given it a light push.

Meanwhile, the bicycle slowed to a stop and the two stepped off of it.

The Kaiserburg slid gently through the air and stopped in front of them. There was no instability in its movements and it was no longer struggling to remain afloat like it had that morning. Even Else could tell the ship could fly.

She watched it in silence.

…Thank goodness!

Walter glanced over his shoulder at her.

"Hmm. Looks like the emblem worked. Good, good."

"…"

"Else?"

"Eh?"

"Why do you look so nervous?"

"I-I'm not exactly nervous…"

"It's thanks to you we got it running. You should be a little happier."

…I am happy!

But that was why she could not speak. Even she felt her role had been too simple. She had only opened the book to the entry Walter had indicated and recited the most powerful emblem to Paul.

Walter could have done it if she had not been there.

Even so, she had been the one to actually do it.

It may have been indirect, but it really was thanks to her that the only ship trying to reach space could fly once more.

Her pulse began to race.

"…"

The man in front of her turned toward her with his usual smile.

She smiled back.

"Isn't this great?" she asked.

"It is. We can fly again."

He sounded almost embarrassed as he answered.

At the very least, he was experiencing the same joy she had felt. And it was an ordinary experience for him. He also had the ridiculous goal of reaching space. No normal person would be willing to clash with the military for their goal.

He and Paul were betting their own lives on this ship and a chance to reach space.

She had nothing like that. Not only did she not have a physical representation like the Kaiserburg, but she had nothing in her heart either.

…What is this? Am I jealous?

Just as she wondered that…

"Else! Move away from that ship!"

Her gaze turned to a deep voice and she saw Gaston rushing out of the mansion. He pointed behind Else and Walter.

Without even turning around, she knew what that meant: the military was entering the yard.

She heard something whiz by and sparks flew from the Kaiserburg's outer paneling. The gunshot reached her a moment later.

If one bullet had flown, more would be coming. Sure enough, more and more sparks blossomed like flowers and the sounds of gunfire joined them.

"…!"

The tail end of the Kaiserburg slid to the side and formed a wall in front of Walter and Else.

"Else! Hurry over here! It's dangerous out there!"

"You're the one that made it so dangerous!"

She knew those words would shut him up.

…If it makes you feel so guilty, don't do it in the first place.

An amplified voice from the forest drowned out the gunfire.

"You piloting the ship and you two hiding behind it! Surrender immediately!"

" 'You two'? Does he mean Else and me?"

"Seems that way."

"Hmm. This misunderstanding is quite interesting indeed. Are you going to surrender?"

"Why do I have to surrender in front of my own house? I'd rather hole up in the house."

"A decent opinion, but we have the Kaiserburg here. The correct options are to escape or fight back."

"Hey! Else! What are you doing!?"

She saw Gaston shouting while hiding behind the mansion's door.

"What are you doing, dad! Have some shame."

"Sh-shut up! The bullets are flying over here too!"

She could indeed see a few broken windows and it did not seem the military was trying very hard to aim. It was quite a commotion .

Else thought for just a moment.

…*What should I do?*

But a moment later, the distant amplified voice shouted at them again.

"Hey! You two hiding there! Hurry up and surrender!"

She frowned and turned to Walter. He was looking at her with a similar expression.

"Hey, Walter."

"Yes?"

"Am I part of your group?"

Walter tilted his head at that question.

"Based on the situation, that's definitely a valid way of looking at it. …Hm."

After a short pause, he clapped his hands and changed his expression.

"Okay. How about you join us on the Kaiserburg?"

She had not expected him to say that.

"Eh!? Ah, wait! Really?"

"If we left you here, you'd be arrested by the military."

"But isn't that ship important to you two?"

"But you helped us get it flying again."

"…!"

She looked taken aback and he smiled bitterly.

"You'll probably have fun if you do. And if you don't, we can always drop you off somewhere or other."

His tone almost seemed to be testing her.

It may have only been in her mind, but she felt like he was asking if she could keep up with them.

And so she nodded.

There was something she wanted to know.

…Why are you so intent on going to space? I want to know.

She knew this young man would not tell her if she simply asked .

He looked her in the eye and gave his usual grin.

"Well, if you force yourself to keep up with me, you'll end up regretting it."

"Why?"

"Because I dream big."

He turned his back on her and stepped up on the side of the Kaiserburg. He then turned his head to look back.

"How about I show you just how amazing and frightening that dream is?"

"Please do."

She smiled just like he was and nodded.

She felt like flying through the sky would answer all of her past questions.

Part 6

Gaston was entirely speechless.

He clearly saw his own daughter boarding that ship.

…What is going on!?

For just an instant, she turned toward him and waved. She was smiling.

It shocked him.

The suspicion that she would never return began to spread through his heart.

"Else!"

He tried to run out from behind the door, but bullets were still flying.

…What is the military thinking!?

The soldiers formed up in the distance were scattering bullets wildly. It was enough of a commotion that the mansion's servants were hiding in the cellar. Calling the police was meaningless when the military was the problem, so there was nothing to be done.

…I will be using this as a bargaining chip later!

With that in mind, he suddenly realized something.

Else was nowhere to be seen. He could only see the floating mass of metal.

…Else!

He felt more panicked than he did angry.

The men he had met yesterday had dreamed of going to space. They had claimed to have created a ship with a new kind of engine for that purpose. He had thought they were very childish.

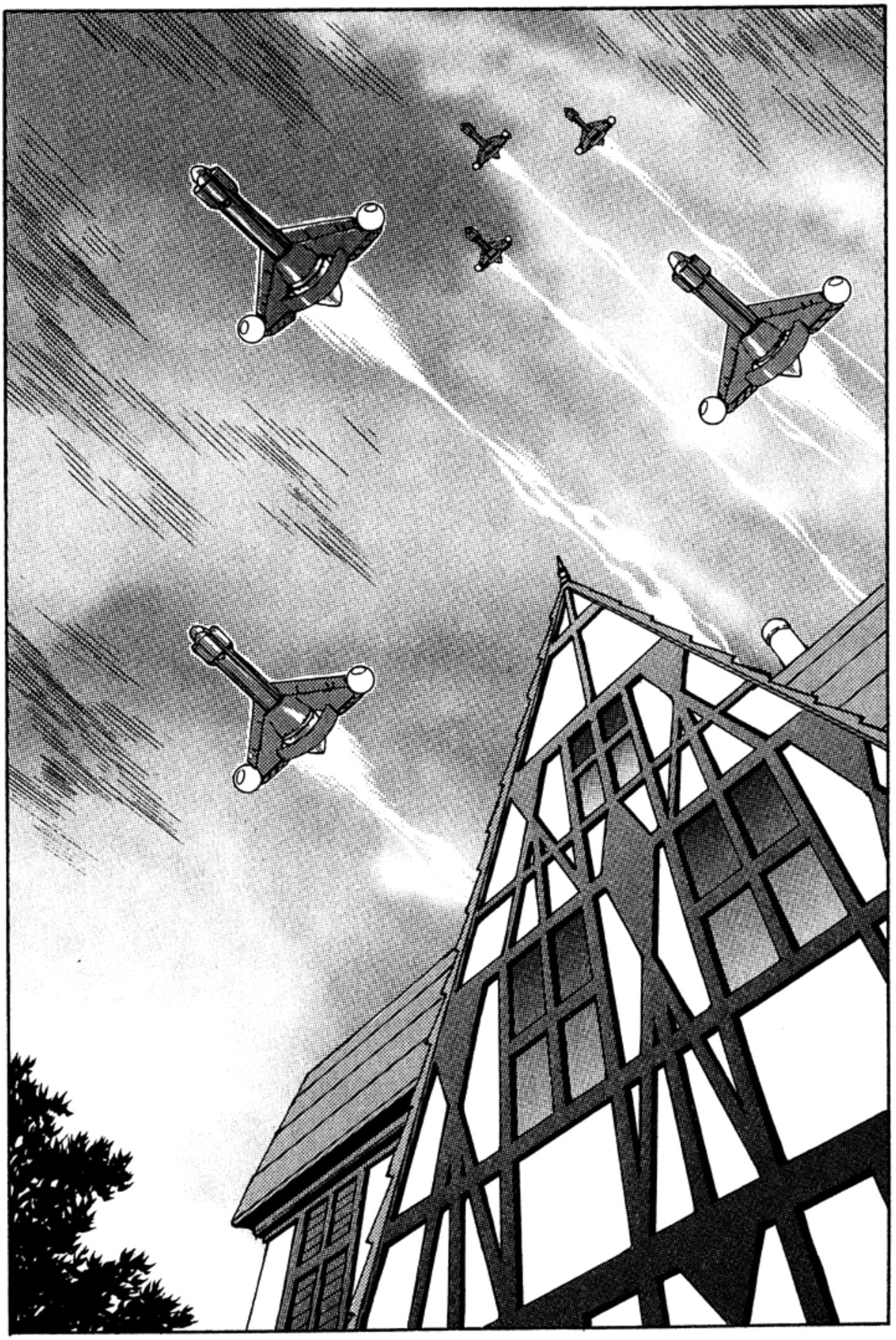
It was true that sort of atmosphere had filled the country fifteen years before. They had recovered from the war, they had been developing further, and they had been aiming for space, so Germany had been filled with excitement.

But it had ended in failure.

The people had realized it was too soon to pursue their dreams and they had pursued reality instead.

Nevertheless, those two men still held onto their dreams.

…I don't get it.



He simply could not understand why they were so intent on going to space. That was what made him panic.

After all, his own daughter was going with them and she had smiled as she did so.

"Else! I…!"

That was the moment when shadows from the sky covered the mansion in darkness from right to left. It only took an instant.

He saw a group of aircraft flying at extreme low altitude.

"What!?"

He heard a roar.

These were the air force's standard craft known as Eisen Soldat. A formation of them was flying above Berlin…no, above his mansion.

Gaston saw this as an omen of the situation growing even further. And he realized his daughter would be flying right into the center of it.

…Is there no way I can stop her? Is there nothing I can do!?

"Else!"

Part 7

"This is surprisingly roomy."

This was her first time in the cockpit. It was four meters wide and across and two meters high, it contained two primary seats side by side, and it had a secondary seat behind them.

Paul sat in the pilot seat on the right and Walter sat in the gunner seat on the left.

"Else, you're a passenger, so please sit in that seat. Can you watch the radar?"

"You're putting your passenger to work?"

"You have to pay the fare somehow, so please take care of this. We're shorthanded."

"That's right. I had to do it all on my own before and it was not fun."

She listened to Paul's teasing tone of voice while sitting in the chair that supported her down to the ankles. Once she sat down, the back automatically changed angle.

"The back seems a little inadequate."

"Oh, sorry. I never thought a woman would be sitting there, so it's probably a little tight in the butt. What is your hip measurement?"

"Um, eighty-… Wait. What are you trying to get me to say!?"

"Oh, c'mon. I'm only asking to know more about the ship and out of simple curiosity."

Meanwhile, Walter lightly tapped his seat's armrests.

With a metallic sound, the armrests rotated upside down. Else saw two palm-sized metal spheres embedded in them. They controlled the field emitters. When using the Schwert and Kugel divine spell weapons, he would rotate the spheres to determine their direction.

"Walter, don't use them too much. The output still isn't at its best."

"Got it."

Walter's tone hinted at a different mood from before.

Else looked up at him. The back of his seat was in the way, but she felt like she knew what expression was on his face.

"Okay, I've connected to the ship's center of gravity. Professor, let's get going."

"Good, good," said Paul in an aged-sounding tone. "dp-XXX Kaiserburg Form One – Strahlen Ritter takes flight!"

With a slight shaking, her vision quickly rose.

"Eh?"

They had ascended in an instant and she had not felt anything bearing down on her like she had expected.

Since the ship flew by manipulating gravity, it must have been able to neutralize inertia too.

She soon realized they had changed direction. It was strange how the ship did not tilt.

…*Wow.*

Light began to flash on the radar in front of her. The device reacted to the fields emitted by spirit stones. There were twelve dots on the screen. The gauge said the radar was scaled by a factor of thirty thousand, so each centimeter on the screen represented three hundred meters. The enemy was approaching fast.

"Here they come! They're directly ahead!"

"I see them."

They had risen to about one hundred meters above Berlin. The forest around Else's home was directly below. Beyond that was a group of stone-like buildings and the tops of brightly-painted housing complexes.

Dark dots were floating above all that and white clouds trailed behind them. The thin clouds were created by the temperature difference between the air and the vacuum formed as they cut through the air. They were contrails.

"Professor, I'm going to use two Schwert."

"Okay, I'll send the power around in five seconds. Don't forget that the weapons can only use thirty percent of their power."

After a short pause, Else saw something outside the cockpit window. It was light. The field emitters on the top and bottom of the ship were producing the divine sword of light known as a Schwert.

"Why is the military trying to get in our way? They really aren't very bright."

"But this ship has to be worth a lot. Sorry for thinking of it like a product, though."

"You wouldn't be able to sell it anyway. Different groups would try to steal it and a war would break out," calmly explained Paul. "Once we fly to space, the entire world will have its eye on us, but we don't plan to give it to anyone. We're thinking about letting it sink to the bottom of the ocean or something like that."

Else felt a chill.

These two men simply wanted to go to space and they were prepared to vanish afterwards.

"Professor, let's go."

With that, Walter placed his hands on the armrests.

The battle was about to begin.

Part 8

Dogfights either ended in a single attack or after passing by the enemy. A fighter craft would fire Kugel or slice with Schwert either head on or while in pursuit.

Giant warships mostly used shells so they could avoid accidental collisions, but craft like the Eisen Soldat primarily fought at close range. They had high mobility, so long-range attacks would not hit them and they could neutralize Kugel with their Schwert.

One Soldat saw a fourth explosion blossom in the sky after another pilot was ejected with a white parachute.

At this distance, the dp-XXX looked the size of a grain of rice. The ship slowed as if watching the dropping parachute.

The Soldat received a transmission.

"Eins 1 to Eins 2 and 3. Eins 4 and 6 will contact the enemy first. We will use an arrow formation. I'll attack while you two cover for me."

Eins 2 nodded.

"Understood."

He checked on Eins 3 to his right. Eins 1, their commander, was down below to complete the triangular formation.

They had not broken the sound barrier, so he heard the roar enveloping the three of them.

He saw two contrails form and draw an arc toward the dp-XXX from above. That would be Eins 4 and 6.

The dp-XXX did not move.

Eins 2 spoke to the neighboring craft.

"Eins 3, what do you think of that ship?"

"I'm not really sure. All I know is that it's powerful."

"Even when it's just floating there like that?"

"Do you want to go up and poke a sleeping tiger?"

Eins 3 had a point. The enemy ship appeared to just be floating, but it had already shot down more than ten of their craft.

"We can't let our guard down."

"Eins 2 and 3, this is Eins 1. Enough chatter. Let's spread out."

"Understood."

As instructed, Eins 2 tilted his craft left. The roar of the craft slicing through the air filled his body as he moved away from Eins 3. The triangle grew larger.

…Is this far enough?

Once he had enough space to freely use his Schwert, he saw the others contact the enemy. Eins 4 and 6 shot toward the dp-XXX from above.

The two craft rapidly descended toward the ship that almost seemed to be basking in the sun.

Suddenly, the ship shot straight up.

"!"

It was on a collision course, so the descending craft corrected their courses to fly by the ship on either side. From his position, Eins 2 had no way of knowing which was Eins 4 and which was Eins 6.

At any rate, the two drew their Schwert and tried to fly past the dp-XXX.

…They're going to hit!

In that very instant, the giant ship suddenly moved in reverse.

"What!?"

A voice came from the communicator and the shout was filled with protest.

It was only natural to protest. A ship flying straight up had suddenly changed course by ninety degrees as if it had been hit.

And it rapidly came to a stop.

An aircraft could not react to these movements.

…This is ridiculous!

"What kind of ship is this!?"

The two craft fell defenselessly past the front of the dp-XXX and the ship swung its two Schwert up as if to strike them in the nose.

Eins 2 saw the swords of light easily slice through the metal.

With a sound much like splitting stone, the two fighter craft were transformed into four masses. The pilots ejected just before the craft collided with the air and exploded.

Eins 2 had no time to sit idly by and watch. It was their turn next. His group of three had to take on that absurd ship now.

…Can we beat it?

As soon as he thought that, Eins 2 heard a voice that stifled the momentum of his thoughts.

"Eins 1 here. I'm going to contact the enemy. Cover for me."

Strength gathered in his eyes and he saw Eins 1 move forward down below. The other craft was beginning its attack.

As Eins 1 charged in below, Eins 2 and 3 had to cover from behind on either side. Tension wrapped around Eins 2's body and his fear slowly vanished.

He checked his radar. The dp-XXX was retreating at about the same speed as they were advancing.

He operated the right and left field emitters to prepare a Kugel in each. He adjusted the field emitters' direction based on his distance from the enemy. The loud sound of their movement pierced his body.

"Eins 2 here. Beginning covering fire!"

He launched the Kugel.

A dull tremor ran though the metal craft and the sound of firing burst toward the back.

The fear from before had completely vanished now. His focus on shooting down this enemy had overwhelmed the fear.

He fired.

"…!"

He could not even hear his own shouting voice, but he continued firing the Kugel again and again.

Eins 3 also fired Kugel from the right.

No one could evade fire from two directions like this. Moving out of the way would expose your back or belly to either the left or right.

Still moving backwards, the dp-XXX sliced through the Kugel with its Schwert.

Eins 1 used the gap that created to approach from below. The covering fire kept the enemy in place, so he would make an attack using the third dimension from outside that line of fire. That was a basic tactic in aerial combat.

As the commander charged in, he drew his Schwert and began flying upside down. He planned to cut into the dp-XXX as their bellies passed by each other.

…Will it work?

Eins 2 stared straight forward as his vision blurred from the vibration of firing his attacks.

His shaking vision saw Eins 1's attack preparing to tear apart the enemy.

In the instant Eins 1 reached the enemy, Eins 2 stopped his covering fire.

And that created an instantaneous opening.

"!"

The dp-XXX moved forward as if kicked. It went all out, ignored the fighter craft approaching from below, and soared with all of its might.

"That thing's fast!"

That movement would have been impossible for a normal fighter craft. It had directly gone from stopped to soaring.

After a moment, it exchanged attacks below and charged forward.

It accelerated even further and their relative speeds filled the gap almost immediately. The mass of metal emitted dull light as it tore through the air.

"…!"

Eins 2 let out a cry not even he could hear and operated the field emitters. He switched from Kugel to Schwert.

The swords of light thrust forward from the field emitters on the ends of the wings.

At the same time, wind with actual mass slammed into him.

"Wah!"

The enemy ship was approaching with frightening speed.

He did not even have time to swing the Schwert.

A mass of roaring noise slammed into him from the right. Their shockwaves had collided as they passed by. He forcibly controlled the shaking of his craft and heard an unpleasant sound run through the core of his body.

He heard an explosion behind him and he knew what it meant.

Eins 3 had been destroyed.

The dp-XXX had chosen to take care of Eins 3 before him.

"…"

He felt a surge of relief.

The feeling of having been saved won out over the regret or anger that his ally had been destroyed.

He subconsciously sped up to escape. Running was the only option. He was at a disadvantage now that the enemy was behind him.

He sped up even further. He was now flying forward at full speed. He was desperate and he was gasping for breath.

The wind and noise rushed behind him as he accelerated. He thought there was no way he could draw any more speed out of the craft.

But that was when he sensed something truly unpleasant.

He noticed an intense presence to his right.

Something was approaching from behind and coming up beside him on the right.

…It can't be!

He was dumbfounded.

…Is something there?

He knew what it was. He knew deep down, but he did not want to admit it. That contradictory thought asked him to check, so he looked to the right.

"…!"

The dp-XXX was there.

"Impossible!"

The enemy ship was flying in reverse.

It had flown straight forward, destroyed Eins 3, and then caught up to him in reverse.

It was absurd. He was moving forward and flying as quickly as possible.

…That thing is on an entirely different level.

Was its pilot even human? What about the centrifugal force? Wouldn't the ship break? Who had built it and how? And…was there no way of defeating it?

There was no one there to answer those questions.

Eins 2's mouth opened to ask a meaningless question.

"What the hell are you!?"

At the same time, he swung his Schwert as hard as he could.

The horizontal strike was sharp and heavy.

However, the dp-XXX was gone.

It performed a side flip as if jumping over Eins 2 from the side.

"…Ah."

Eins 2's gaze followed the ship as it flew over him with the ceiling of the sky behind it. He looked up at the large leaping ship that almost seemed to be dancing.

For just an instant, it showed its belly to the sky but then twisted around. The backlight of the sun vividly showed off its silhouette.

…It's beautiful.

As soon as that thought ran through his mind, Eins 2's fighter craft was sliced through by the Schwert extending from the dp-XXX.

Part 9

After Paul and Walter performed a ridiculous midair side-flip without batting an eye, the next enemy appeared in the cockpit's front window.

It descended from high in the sky like a giant comet. It was a shell known as a Bogen.

A Bogen was a physical shell fired with gunpowder, but it was filled with divine spell charms that would spread damage over a wide area when it hit. It far outdid a Kugel in destructive power, but the ammunition was too bulky to be used in anything but a large ship.

The scorching hot shell was terrifyingly accurate.

The dp-XXX barrel rolled to escape it.

If one strained their eyes, six great forms were visible just below the clouds.

They were the Bladlikburg fleet.

"So Oscar's finally shown up! Their star player has joined the match."

"Really? And right when it's about to grow, too."

Else was distracted by them, but she suddenly noticed a light on the radar and quickly looked back down.

"Hey."

"Yes? What is it?"

"That one we avoided earlier is approaching from above."

"What a pain. Walter, what should we do?"

"Well, let's try to avoid needless destruction. How about we move forward and avoid it while we go pay Oscar a visit."

Else and Paul both nodded in agreement.

That may have been what created an opening.

Part 10

The fighter craft approaching from above was Eins 1 which they had avoided earlier.

The dp-XXX moved to avoid him again by accelerating forward.

But they did not escape. Instead of drawing his Schwert or firing a Kugel, he flew in a straight line and crashed into them.

The screaming of metal filled the sky.

Chapter 4: The Legend Races

Part 1

It felt like her head had been knocked off.

They had been flying without feeling any inertia, but all of a sudden, a blow came from above. The great tremor passed from her head and out through her feet.

The blow was so strong that she thought the ship had broken in two.

"Kyah!"

As soon as she cried out, Else felt an impact toss her upwards. At the same time, a deep roar hit her in the gut and the cockpit filled with scarlet flames.

…I'm going to die!

She squeezed her eyes shut, but heard an oddly cheerful voice.

"We did it, professor! It advanced to the next form! The second engine is up and running!"

Part 2

Oscar used binoculars to watch from the Bladlikburg Eins's bridge.

Once it collided with the dp-XXX, the Eisen Soldat turned into a ball of flames and produced an explosive blast of smoke. The dp-XXX was swallowed up by those flames and smoke.

Shouts of surprise and admiration filled the bridge, but Oscar alone had a different feeling.

"Silence!"

His barking voice quieted the bridge.

"We may have gone too far."

He moved the binoculars to look around and saw the four remaining Soldat approaching the mass of smoke floating in the sky. They were firing Kugel as they approached to make sure the enemy truly had been sunk.

…Were they really sunk?

Oscar gulped.

At that very moment, pure white Kugel shot from the smoke. These were no normal Kugel. They were Eisen Kugel with the ability to freeze.

…It can't be!

Before he could say anything, the white Kugel assaulted the four flying fighter craft. The Soldat drew their Schwert, but the white trajectories slipped below and behind them as if mocking them.

These were clearly auto-homing Kugel.

Also, the dp-XXX had not possessed this functionality just a moment before. It had been built for close-quarters combat and had not possessed the spare power needed for long-range weapons like Kugel. After all, only one of its three engines had been running.

However, it had definitely fired these Kugel and they had caught up to the four Soldat from behind and pierced straight through them. Instead of exploding, the fighter craft shattered like glass. The Eisen Kugel had flash-frozen and then destroyed them.

At the same time, the smoke was blown away and a ship was revealed.

Oscar shouted out loud as soon as he saw it.

"So that is what it means for the ship to grow!"

He now understood Walter's confidence in the incomplete ship's ability to reach space. He also understood the word he had found on the scraps of a document remaining in the Wagner Laboratory.

"The ship itself grows and transforms to rid itself of its deficiencies!"

The dp-XXX had literally evolved.

Its basic form had not changed, so the sword-like shape remained.

However, the arch-like wings on the back of the ship had stretched back like a skirt and spire-like horns extended forward from the wings. Also, a few areas on the outer paneling bulged out . The ship had a somewhat feminine beauty to it.

The Schwert sticking out from the ship were gone, so its focus had likely shifted from close-quarters to long-range.

In ancient times, fish had gained the legs needed to leave the ocean. In the same way, the dp-XXX had gained further power to combat larger numbers of enemies.

"This is absurd!"

Oscar shouted and clenched his teeth.

Part 3

Else opened her eyes and found she was alive.

"Eh?"

Nothing had changed inside the cockpit. Paul was looking her way and Walter was staring at a scrap of paper in his hand. She could see the sky through the window beyond them.

…I'm alive?

As she thought that, Walter stuck the paper in his lab coat pocket and muttered to himself.

"It looks like I'll be able to get there soon. I mean it."

Then he turned around.

"Are you okay, Else?"

She realized the paper he had stuck in his breast pocket was a photograph, but she was not crass enough to ask whose photo it was. Also, she had a more important question.

"We're fine? But I saw fire…"

"Yeah, the fighter craft on top of us exploded, so you probably saw the flames from that."

This had to be a sturdy ship if that was not enough to sink it.

"Were you scared? Sorry about that."

"I-I was not scared."

As she put on a strong front, she heard a slight metallic creaking . She floated up slightly, returned to normal, and heard the ship shaking somewhere.

"Wh-what is that? Is this thing broken after all?"

"No. The metal parts are growing for the transformation as it evolves."

She must have given an unpleasant look at the number of unreasonable terms Walter used because he smiled a little.

"To put it simply, all of the ship's components have healing spell emblems carved into them. Not only does that allow it to repair itself, but it lets it modify itself."

"And?"

"When activated too nearby each other, the Kaiserburg's emblem engines resonate with each other and stop working, but that's just because the engines aren't used to each other."

"You mean the ship's self-modification ability will adapt the engines to each other?"

"Yeah, you've got the picture. Your heart beats without you telling it to, right? In the same way, the Kaiserburg realizes its own deficiencies as it fights and is injured, so it tries to unify all of its components toward a single goal."

"…"

She had no words.

The ship was completely ridiculous. It was a collection of metal parts, and yet it almost seemed alive.

Previous technology was all about strengthening the armor or putting in a more powerful engine. In other words, the people determined the machine's traits and created it that way.

But the Kaiserburg was different. The ship strengthened itself. Paul and Walter had simply helped by loading it with the parts it

would eventually use. And the Kaiserburg was living up to their expectations.

…*I see.*

"It seems that collision showed the Kaiserburg the need to combat a greater number of opponents. You could say this is like a fistfighting child growing into a young man who wields an actual weapon."

"Two of the emblem engines are running. Just one more."

"It will evolve further?"

"Yep. According to our predictions, the next evolution will take it to space."

Walter then faced forward.

Else gently crossed her arms and brought a hand to her chest. Her pulse was racing.

…*Why?*

She did not know.

She felt a new kind of excitement or joy that was not quite the same as during a festival or after scoring well on a test. She felt a powerful urge to tell someone about this incomparable excitement.

She may have been approaching her answer, little by little.

…But I'm not there yet, am I?

She bit her lip and nodded.

The ship angled up just a little and gave her a view into the sky.

There, she saw a number of aerial aircraft carriers with many small shapes flying from them.

"Don't they know they're no match for us? They're persistent, I'll give them that."

"Some people will never understand until they've been beaten. Let's get this over with."

The Kaiserburg shot forward as if responding to Paul's words.

Its acceleration was more stable than before.

Part 4

Oscar confirmed a certain fact.

…We can't win using normal methods.

Most likely, the dp-XXX's attack power was on the level of a battleship and its mobility was greater than that of a fighter craft. On top of that, it had no restrictions to its movements.

The absurd actions captured by his binoculars were proof enough of that.

A formation of eight Soldat descended to surround the enemy.

The dp-XXX suddenly split into two. This was an illusion technique created by a weapon known as a Phantom. One of the ships accelerated upwards while the other accelerated downwards.

The eight fighter craft hesitated.

If one of them was being used as a decoy, the one escaping down below would be the real one.

In an instant, the formation passed by the rising dp-XXX.

That settled it.

The descending dp-XXX vanished.

"!"

The rising one rolled onto its back and light gathered in its four field emitters.

Oscar recognized that light. It was the light of a battleship weapon.

"It can even use Kunst!?"

Four bullets of light shot from the dp-XXX and to the formation below.

The four afterimages of light quickly drew a shape in the sky. The shape was known as a Circle Emblem and it was created by lining up normal emblems in a circle.

As soon as the emblem took form, great darkness filled a space one hundred meters across. But this was no mere darkness. The scenery around it seemed to bend.

It was a mass of high gravity.

Oscar had never actually seen this phenomenon before. He had only ever read of it in legends. God was said to have used that technique when transforming the earth as he liked.

"The Finster gravity spell."

The eight Soldat were unable to avoid the darkness and crashed into it.

Eight red flowers bloomed on the top of the darkness.

Eight metallic rumbles followed.

The giant mass of gravity vanished as if satisfied with the destruction of the enemy. The reflected shards of the Soldat floated in empty air a bit before falling.

…The Soldat are no match for it.

Just as Oscar frowned at the battlefield below, a new direction filled that battlefield.

The dp-XXX was ascending right toward him.

He shuddered as he briefly thought he sensed the intent to kill.

But he gathered strength in his gut again.

…*We cannot afford to lose!*

"Have Zwei and Fünf's guns target the dp-XXX. All remaining Soldat are to descend to Berlin's Tempelhof Airport! We will settle this with shellfire!"

"Understood!"

"If you see an opportunity, send out Mayer's new model! Prepare it for takeoff!"

Strength filled his eyes as he barked orders.

The dp-XXX was still slowly rising.

Part 5

Two ships of the Bladlikburg fleet moved forward and they continually fired red hot Bogen.

The Kaizerburg had been waiting until it was closer to fire its Finster Kunst, but it did so now as a barrier. The emblem was instantly drawn in the sky and became a giant sphere of gravity.

The Bogen could be heard bursting on the other side of the gravity sphere.

Aboard the Kaiserburg, Walter scratched his head in the gunner ’s seat.

“Ahh, ahh. What a shame. It takes time, skill, and motivation to fire a Kunst.”

“I don’t think motivation has anything to do with it.”

“So what are we going to do? Run away?”

“If we run here, they’ll just pursue us again. I’d like to settle it here.”

Walter sounded confident, but Else did not see how they could fight any more than this. They were currently only avoiding or hiding from the enemy attack.

Once they left the shelter of the gravity sphere, they would be hit by concentrated fire and the gravity sphere would eventually vanish on its own.

She heard several loud noises beyond the gravity sphere. They reverberated in her gut and sounded like splitting stone. A few shots seemed to have missed their mark and fallen to Berlin.

“Hmm. This is a problem. I don’t want the military to destroy Berlin like this.”

"Oh? You can be surprisingly reasonable sometimes, Walter."

"Of course I can. If it was me, I'd find a more artistic way to destroy the city."

"Do you have any idea what you're saying?"

"C'mon, Else. Is there anything more beautiful than wanting it all to yourself?"

He may not have been all that wrong.

Else found herself looking up toward the heavens, but…

"Hey, Walter. The Kunst is about to disappear."

"That isn't good. Should I fire another one?"

"That wouldn't change our situation in the long run and the third engine isn't showing any sign of running."

That meant they would not reach the next evolution doing this.

After a short silence, Paul spoke.

"Walter, let's try out the Panzer Emblem. We have a perfect target in front of us."

"That would be best, given the situation."

"Eh? What are you two doing?"

"Quiet, young lady. And stay seated."

After Paul's comment, the Kaiserburg moved back a little.

"Once the Kunst vanishes, we're going to activate the Panzer Emblem, break through one of the big ones, correct our lowered power output, and then escape."

"C'mon, let's go all out."

Walter sat back in his seat, quickly moved some of the controls in front of the seat, and then hit the control panel. Else heard something fit into place.

He began hitting and stroking the four metal spheres on his armrests with a set rhythm.

Similarly, Paul moved the control stick.

"dp-XXX Kaiserburg Form Two – Eiskalt Königin. Activating Panzer Emblem," muttered Walter. "Professor, I'm going to sync the power release and ether release in five seconds."

The sound of the Bogen striking the barrier shook the ship.

"Understood. Panzer Emblem Form Two – Eiskalt Engel. Activation preparations…complete."

Paul's words coincided with the Finster Kunst barrier vanishing .

The blue sky opened up before their eyes.

But that sky was obstructed by the next Bogen flying in from the Bladlikburg. They were fast.

"Now, then."

As she watched the flaming shells approach, Else heard Walter take a breath.

"Here we go!"

She felt a sudden lurch.

She could not even comprehend the instant that they began to fly.

"Kyah!"

An impact seemed to throw her backwards and the acceleration was great enough to sweep her short hair backwards. This was likely the first inertia she had felt from the Kaiserburg's movements.

They were racing along.

The sky outside the cockpit window seemed to be blowing backwards.

Light reflected from her eyes that she somehow managed to keep open. That light was entering through the window because the entire ship was glowing.

…Is that ether?

The emblems carved into the ship's outer paneling were gathering ether from the air and forming a powerful field.

Ether was the element that made up all things and the arrangement of the emblem was using ether to create a certain form. What could be seen as fire, ice, lightning, or weight wrapped around the ship, materialized, and turned the ship into a giant bullet.

This was a Panzer Emblem.

The Bogen flying their way collided with the glowing ether armor and were destroyed in an instant. They did not even produce any noise.

…!

They accelerated further and she heard Paul speak.

"We've reached Form 2's estimated maximum propulsion of 9.3 times gravitational acceleration! We're going to hit!"

Else saw a large mass of metal.

Before she could recognize it as a Bladlikburg, they collided with it.

At that moment, Else was not watching the radar in front of her. If she had, she would have seen a single dot of light rapidly approaching the Kaiserburg.

Part 6

Just as the Kaiserburg prepared to activate its Panzer Emblem, Mayer sat in his cockpit with his eyes closed.

The top and bottom of his fighter craft were attached vertically to the side of Bladlikburg Eins, so his position was similar to lying on his back with his legs curled up and his hands on the control stick.

He had been piloting this new model ever since the prototype phase, so he was used to it and thought it was an excellent craft.

It was most likely the only fighter craft that could take on the dp-XXX.

"…"

He had closed his eyes to contain his excitement.

The men he knew had finally created the ideal ship they had dreamed of and were now fighting him and the military.

He felt some small regret.

He had attended college during the preparatory phase of entering the military, but the research and development of the dp-XXX had advanced so slowly that he had thought it would never end. He had even helped design the cockpit and wiring.

However, he had not been there for its completion.

He almost felt abandoned.

Why had they not called him there to join them?

…*Was it because I'm in the military?*

"No."

Strength filled the inner ends of his eyebrows.

…*I would have declined even if they did call me there.*

He had a family, comrades, and a trustworthy commander. He could not abandon all that. It would be a shame to abandon them for a goal as ridiculous as going to space.

…*They would never invite someone with that kind of restriction.*

He sighed.

At the same time, a voice reached him over the communicator.

"Second Lieutenant Mayer! The dp-XXX is approaching and the Flammen Ritter will be launched in twelve seconds! Please get ready!"

"Understood."

He answered and opened his eyes.

He saw the deep blue sky.

Part 7

Oscar saw the newly evolved Panzer Emblem.

It was an angel. It had grown giant white wings and they were the wings of a bird of prey. It resembled a white statue and it left a trail of light as it collided with the Bladlikburg Fünf aircraft carrier.

The Fünf's great hull was instantly dyed white. It had frozen.

A moment later, the winged angel broke through the Fünf.

The sound was quiet at first. It only resembled a stone breaking through glass. But a moment later, it grew to a great roar much like a waterfall being deflected.

The giant aerial aircraft carrier crumbled.

While wrapped in the angelic Panzer Emblem, the Kaiserburg had collided with and torn a hole through its center. The supposedly metal aircraft carrier crumbled like sand and fell apart around that hole.

It had been struck by a mass of cold so great that even the metal froze over.

Small fragments scattered through the sky.

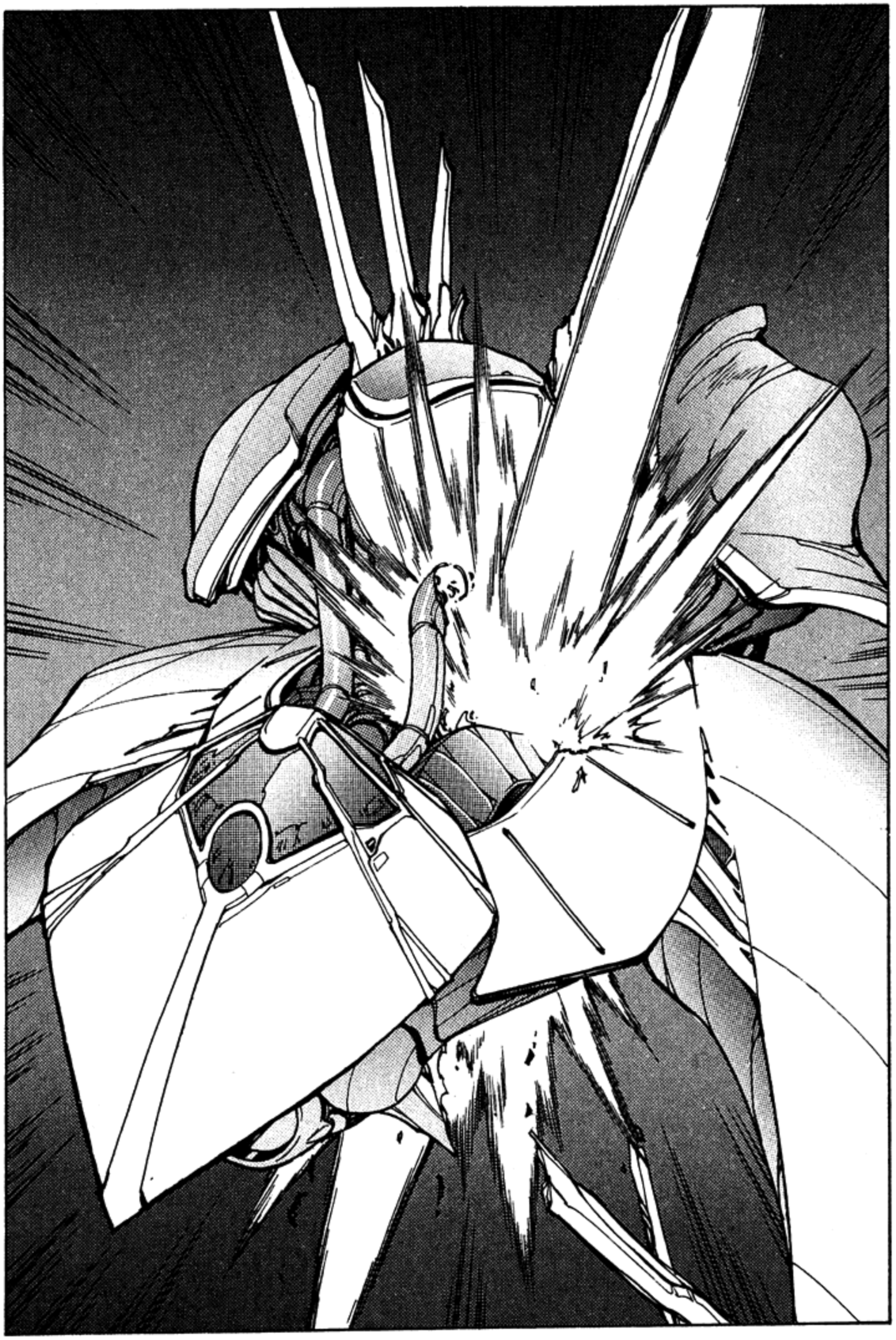
Behind it all, the Kaiserburg floated motionlessly.

…What a monster!

"Mayer! This is your chance! Go!"

"Understood!"

The speaker behind him produced Mayer's voice.



Not even a moment after the voice had vanished from the air, a shadow shot down next to the Kaiserburg. It moved too quickly to be seen.

It was fast, but a white cloud clearly showed its path after the fact.

"Nh!"

After a short delay, the Bladlikburg Eins shook violently. The shockwave from the shadow breaking the sound barrier had struck it.

Oscar watched the shadow even as the ship shook.

"Did it hit!?"

The hope in his shouted question was fulfilled.

A glowing spear stabbed into the Kaiserburg as it floated in midair.

Part 8

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow."

The sudden impact had thrown Else from her seat. She held her head after hitting it on the floor and asked a question.

"What was that? Did that Panzer Emblem thing fail?"

She saw Walter had also been thrown from his chair and he now dangled from the armrest by his legs. Paul seemed to be stuck between the pilot's seat and the window because she could see his feet busily kicking at the air.

Walter reached a hand to the floor.

The photograph she had seen before had fallen there.

Without getting up, he collected it, put it in his pocket, and looked to Else.

"Walter, what was that just now?"

"A new model of military fighter craft, I'd wager."

"A new model?"

"Yes, most likely. But more importantly, Else."

"What?"

"You have some lovely legs on you."

She suddenly looked down and saw her skirt had caught on her chair's armrest, revealing her legs.

"Kyah!"

She pulled the skirt down so quickly she almost tore it and she glared at Walter.

"Where do you think you're looking!? And now of all times!"

"I have a…personal fondness for beautiful things and good-looking women."

"You…idiot."

She had trouble responding too strongly when he was so open about it. After all, she had confidence in her looks. Then again, she was the type that was also popular with underclassmen girls.

"This isn't good. One of the engines was damaged."

Paul had managed to right himself at some point and he was now looking at the control panel.

"What was that impact?"

"A new type of weapon fired by the craft that flew past us. We can't see it from here, but something is probably stabbing into the ship. Maybe something like a projectile version of a Schwert."

"What does that mean?"

Walter nodded at her question.

"Even if you have the power to heal wounds, you can't do anything if the patient still has the blade sticking into them."

"You mean…?"

"Yes, the Kaiserburg can't fight. Not the best turn of events."

"How are you so calm!?"

"Panicking isn't going to fix the engine. Instead, we need to think about what comes next."

That was when a young male voice came from the communicator.

"dp-XXX, can you hear me? Um, how are you doing, Walter? And you, professor? This is Second Lieutenant Mayer Schrier piloting the dds-033 Flammen Ritter."

Else frowned and turned to Walter.

"Who's that?"

"The underclassmen who spoke to me when we were on the bicycle. The kid who used to spill chemicals in the lab is piloting fighter craft now. That's kind of scary."

"Try to take this seriously. Can you beat him? How skilled is he ?"

"He could target the Kaiserburg's engine at that speed, so he's probably better than me."

"What kind of person is he?"

"He's what you call a handsome young man. You saw him before, right?"

"What kind of family is he from?"

"An old noble family. Right, professor?"

"How's his personality?"

"Patient and fairly good-natured."

"Then we don't stand a chance."

"Relax. I've got him beat when it comes to height."

"And in stupidity, I see."

"Calm down, Else. Could you stay quiet for a little while?"

She frowned and he only smiled.

"I'll show you I have him beat in brains too."

"You're making this up as you go along, aren't you?"

"Oh, c'mon. It's called a strategy."

As she sighed, he asked Paul a question.

"Professor, what should we do about this traitor of an underclassman?"

There was no ill will in Walter's voice.

Paul operated some of the controls and a scratchy sound came from somewhere in the cockpit. The communicator had been switched on, so Walter called out.

"Um, Mayer? Can you hear me, you idiot? You stupid, pathetic novice."

"Yes, I can hear you! Please stop embarrassing me over the radio!"

Those words were joined by a descending fighter craft.

It was black. It somewhat resembled an Eisen Soldat, but the giant spherical propulsion devices at the bases of the wings were firing flames straight down.

It was the Flammen Ritter which meant Flame Knight.

"A vertical take-off and landing craft, huh? It must have been tough pulling that off with rocket technology."

Mayer laughed bitterly at Paul's comment.

"Yes, it seemed they had trouble without the technology you have. I'm sure this looks like old technology to you, but do not take it lightly. I believe this craft outdoes the dp-XXX in both acceleration and assault power."

"That previous attack got us pretty good, I'll admit. So Mayer, what are you going to do with us?"

"That is up to Commander Oscar. I do not have the authority to decide."

"Ha! You're just a rank and file soldier!"

"I see you haven't changed, Walter."

At the same time, the deep sound of someone clearing their throat came from the communicator.

A tense atmosphere quickly filled the cockpit.

"The dp-XXX can no longer fly. Isn't that right, Walter?"

"Oh, it's Oscar. Long time, no see."

"Quiet. Surrender is your only option. If you try to escape in that damaged ship, we will not hesitate to target the cockpit. After all, we would like to minimize damage to the ship itself."

"Hmm. You're as good at provoking people as always."

"I was simply suggesting you surrender. How was I provoking you?"

"I'm the kind of person that wants to do things I'm told I can't."

"Then feel free to escape. If you can in that damaged ship, that is."

Walter exaggeratedly crossed his arms.

"Oscar, do you want me that badly?"

"It is the dp-XXX I am interested in, not you."

"But the Kaiserburg and I are inseparable."

"Be shot down or surrender. Those are your options. You have ten seconds to decide."

The older man's tone suggested he was serious.

Else saw Walter's expression stiffen and she heard him say something more.

"If you're interested in the Kaiserburg, does it mean you've accepted it can reach space?"

Oscar readily answered.

"Perhaps."

He took a breath.

"But it is still too soon. It may be able to reach space, but I cannot allow it just yet."

"I see, I see. Your opinion has changed a good bit, hasn't it? After all, you're letting us live when you say that now."

"Yes, you're right. The dp-XXX cannot run without you two. I will admit you had guts to burn most of the documents in the laboratory."

"You think so, too? It burned as spectacularly as you'd expect of my lab."

"What do you mean 'your' lab? That laboratory was built by our nation! You were not free to destroy it as you pleased."

"See, professor? I told you we should've asked for permission before destroying it."

Walter clapped his hands with that comment, but the voice from the communicator silenced him.

"Quiet. I have no idea what you are thinking, but you cannot waste any more time. The dp-XXX will be brought aboard the Bladlikburg with the Lanze still skewering it. You will be brought from the ship and interrogated."

"Ooh, I love clichés like that."

"But I am not foolish enough to think that is enough to quiet you."

"I'm honored you feel that way."

Walter laughed, stood up, and made a declaration.

"I'll make sure you truly regret not killing us here. We've decided we're going to space no matter what might happen."

"I am aware and I am prepared to stop you."

"You sound confident."

Oscar replied to Walter's smiling comment and the name he gave was powerful enough to shake Else's heart.

"Of course I am, Walter Talstrasse."

Part 9

The man who first went to space and never returned was named Huber Talstrasse.

Part 10

"…!"

Else gasped.

She had realized why Walter was so intent on going to space.

A certain statement connected that young man to his father.

…The curiosity to see what no one has ever seen before and the ambition to go farther than anyone ever has before.

He had not sounded any more serious than usual, but he had said that was a favorite quote of his. She now knew his father had been the adventurer to put those words to practice.

"…"

Her heart skipped a beat.

She had realized what Walter was trying to do. It may not have been a pretty thing and it may have been a raw thing, but it was an important truth to her.

This young man had a father who was in the farthest place in the world and he wanted to go farther than anyone ever had.

Else looked at Walter.

She wanted to say something, but she could not form the words. She could not find the right words. Every expression she came up with sounded silly. But…

…I'm the same.

That thought appeared clear in her mind.

…I'm the same. …I am!

The words formed in her heart.

…Going farther than anyone! Going farther than anything! going anywhere!

That was her way of doing things.

And she had a means of fulfilling that dream.

She only had to aim for space.

She had the curiosity to want to go, she had gained the resolve needed to keep fighting, and she believed in the possibility of actually getting there.

Her pulse began to race and refused to slow down.

Walter turned toward her.

When he saw her expression, he briefly looked surprised, but then he gestured for Paul to cut the radio connection.

Once Paul complied, Walter took a breath and smiled at Else.

"Is something making you nervous, Else?"

"…Yes."

There was a lot she wanted to say, but one thing in particular left her mouth.

"Hey. We aren't going to give up here, are we?"

The two men exchanged a glance when they heard that.

And they both gave meaningful smiles.

They were clearly plotting something.

Chapter 5: The Legend Leaps

Part 1

Oscar sighed when he saw the two who were brought to the Bladlikburg Eins's bridge.

"You certainly caused us a lot of trouble, Professor Wagner and Walter."

Walter smiled at that. He faced Oscar without even glancing at the soldiers restraining him on either side.

"More importantly, you should probably check what we're carrying, Oscar."

"I am aware. I will not let my guard down twice."

Oscar nodded and the two soldiers on either side of the two men checked through their clothes. Their hands moved quickly and professionally.

"Are they carrying anything?"

"Only a license, a wallet, and a seal, commander."

"You'd better give those back afterwards," warned Paul.

Oscar frowned.

"If you want them back, why not tell us what we want to know?"

"That's a pretty sad offer."

"I know you two. You have nothing else."

"You've got us there."

As soon as Paul smiled, the soldier searching Walter's clothes let out a low scream and was knocked away.

"!"

Oscar reached for the handgun at his waist.

"Walter, what did you do?"

"…"

The young man did not answer. He only stared down at the soldier who was groaning and holding his stomach. Oscar realized Walter was holding the chest of his lab coat.

"What are you hiding?"

Walter returned his gaze.

"A memento from my mother."

He showed off what looked like a scrap of paper.

…Is that a photograph?

Oscar frowned again.

"I would like to apologize for my soldier's rudeness, but I can't."

He turned to a nearby soldier who had nothing to do.

"Carry the fallen soldier out."

"Sorry about that. I tend to lash out without thinking."

Walter gave a quick nod to the man being carried away and then turned back to Oscar.

Paul crossed his arms and looked up at Oscar.

He was acting like he owned the ship, so Oscar frowned and looked outside the window.

A dark shadow obstructed the sun in the western sky. It was another Bladlikburg flying alongside the Eins.

A sword-like form could be seen on the Zwei's deck.

It was the dp-XXX and it was strapped to the deck with thick wires. Both the ship and the metal wires shined in the evening sun.

"…"

"What is it, Oscar?" asked Paul.

But Oscar did not look away from that ship filled with advanced technology.

However, he did speak.

"I will say the dp-XXX was shot down after engaging my unit in combat."

He turned around and brought his gaze to the two men.

"You have not hidden any documents related to the dp-XXX, have you?"

"We have."

"What?"

"Just kidding."

"I am trying to be serious here."

"I don't want to hear that from someone trying to look cool by staring into the setting sun."

"If you want anything out of us, you'll have to force it out. You're good at that, aren't you?"

The two of them held out their chests proudly.

…*These two*…

When Oscar spoke again, some weariness had entered his voice.

"If that is what you want, that is what you will get."

"Wow. You sure give in easily. You're probably easy to trick."

"Silence."

Oscar snapped his fingers.

"Take these two to a guest room. A first-class one."

"Yes, sir."

After a sharp reply, the soldiers restraining the two of them grabbed their arms and walked out.

Walter and Paul made no attempt to resist as they were almost dragged off of the bridge.

Oscar sighed as he watched them leave.

Paul must have heard because he stopped walking and looked over his shoulder.

"Oscar."

"What?"

"You must have it tough."

That was all the elderly engineer said before facing forward again. The back of his blue work outfit seemed to want to say

something more as he began walking once more. The soldiers on either side of him briefly glanced back at Oscar.

"…"

But he remained silent.

…Tough?

"Whose fault do you think that is?"

His quiet comment sounded a little exhausted.

Behind him, red filled the setting sun.

Part 2

The Bladlikburg Eins was primarily a command ship, so it was equipped with little weaponry. Instead, it had an abundance of patrol equipment and guest space. The vast metal box even contained a café lounge.

It looked like a city's café had been placed on the ship as-is. Twenty table and chair sets were attached to the floor and intentionally dim lighting filled the brown space.

The window on the outer wall was shuttered and it was a nice place to relax if one ignored the stuffiness.

Late at night, those with the night shift would often stop by to escape their drowsiness. At this time, it was relatively empty.

The young officer in a dress uniform sitting by the window was the only person there.

It was Mayer.

He was blankly trying to kill time. Not long before, he had been resting in his room.

Kaffee was good for waking one up and a bit of tension was perfect for his next job.

He avoided alcohol. He had not had a drop of it since Walter and Paul had sent him to the hospital during the university lab's freshmen welcoming party. As a German, this made him quite unusual.

He checked his wristwatch and found it was 6:12.

…Still too soon.

He had to descend to the surface at 6:30. He was going to greet and apologize to the Breuer family for all the trouble they had caused.

The military or police would normally just send out a brief document, but Oscar did not accept that. He would always talk it out without looking down on the other party or debasing himself.

Mayer was certain the true form of a soldier could be seen in that man.

He had a feeling everyone in Air Force Division 5 had felt the same thing in Oscar.

But his thoughts were interrupted.

“Oh, Mayer.”

He looked up at the familiar voice and found Oscar.

The man held a white cup of *kaffee*.

Mayer quickly began to stand and salute, but…

"No need."

Oscar sat across the table from him and tilted his body a little to look out the window. He looked somehow weak.

"You aren't going to drink any beer?"

"After so many of my men died, I am not in the mood."

Oscar sighed.

"What is the matter?" asked Mayer.

"Nothing. I was just thinking."

His words lacked his usual sharp strength.

"If it is about the Breuer family, do not worry. I will handle it. You please focus on your job."

"The moon will be out tonight, so do not travel in a spirit craft. …Got it?"

"Yes, sir. I was not planning to."

On nights with strong moonlight, spirit engines could lose control, so gliders were used instead. Gliders were powerless ships

with only floating emblems carved into them. They were a slow but safe means of transportation.

"But that ship does not have to worry about the moonlight," muttered Oscar.

Mayer followed his gaze out the window and to the moonlit dp-XXX on the Zwei's deck. The lance of light called a Lanze still skewered its back.

"Are you curious?"

He turned to the voice and found Oscar facing him.

Strength had returned to his eyes. The sharpness in his gaze seemed like it would pierce through everything and see through any lies, so Mayer gave a definite nod.

"I am."

"Why?"

"I was working to build that ship just a few years ago."

He hesitated for a moment.

"And the people I look up to are piloting it."

"I see." Oscar sighed. "That is the ship created by Huber Talstrasse's son and friend so they can reach space."

"I think it is an amazing piece of technology."

"But it is too much for this age."

Mayer nodded.

The military was essentially controlled by a madman known as the Führer. That man would undoubtedly try to use the dp-XXX for war. The man had a strong love of heroes, so a one-of-a-kind ship like the dp-XXX would seem quite attractive to him.

They wanted to avoid that.

"What will we do?"

"I have a mountain villa in Munich. We can dismantle it, take it there, and store it away."

"It seems to me using the ground forces would be a problem."

"Of course. That is why it will be done in absolute secrecy. The dismantled parts will be boxed up, labelled as items left behind by the deceased, and sent to the homes of those we can trust."

Twelve had died in the previous encounter with the dp-XXX. That was small for the size of the commotion, so it would not draw suspicion if they exaggerated the number killed.

"From there, the boxes can be transported to my home during the time for New Years' greetings. If they are carried to my mountain villa as materials for building a horse-riding field, no one will suspect a thing."

"The secret police have grown more active lately, so we can't let our guard down."

"No." Oscar's expression loosened a bit. "Turning the villa into a storehouse will ruin the summer breaks, though."

"Your daughter is going to cry."

Mayer had never met Oscar's daughter. Oscar did not like to mix his work with his private life, so he rarely mentioned her. The previous spring, Oscar had suddenly asked him a question.

"Mayer, I only ask because you are young, but what do you think I should send my daughter who is about to enter middle school?"

That was the first he had ever heard of her.

He could only guess, but Mayer had a feeling Oscar was not working for his country or the military. He was probably working for the people, be they his family, soldiers, or simply citizens.

Mayer doubted the man himself had realized what he worked for and he would probably refuse to admit it even if he had. Nevertheless, Mayer was certain of it.

After all, an old soldier approaching retirement had once told him something.

"That man is only harsh when he's in the military."

Mayer had seen a few scenes since then that supported that.

Currently, Oscar gave a small smile.

"You're right. Maybe I should take her to Italy this year."

Mayer had a thought while watching the man.

…*Family.*

A question occurred to him and he simply spoke it aloud

"Is he pursuing his father?"

"He? You mean Walter?"

"Yes.

"Most likely."

Oscar admitted it surprisingly readily.

"I do understand. I heard some things about Huber while investigating the Wagner Laboratory, but it did not seem he was a man who showed much concern for his family."

"…"

Mayer knew that as well. Walter would sometimes fall silent and it was almost always when his father came up.

But…

"Would you choose a father like that to pursue and set as your goal?"

Mayer came from an old noble family, so he had been blessed by his family. He had long ago decided to take a different path from his father who managed a farm and his father had accepted his decision. When he had entered the military, his father had even asked him to bring honor to the family name.

That left him unable to even imagine living in a family like Walter's.

"Soon after he lost his father, his mother passed away from the emotional burden. It was only then that he began to think seriously about going to space, but it almost feels like…"

"Like he is doing it to spite his father?"

"Yes."

That response brought a short silence.

After three heavy breaths, Oscar looked up into Mayer's eyes.

"Mayer."

"What is it?"

"Aren't Huber and Walter a lot alike?"

That comment shocked Mayer.

"They both rush forward even if it means sacrificing those around them, don't they? And isn't that exactly why you looked up to him? Am I wrong, Mayer?"

"You are exactly right." Mayer sighed. "I undoubtedly looked up to his way of doing things. But…"

I can't do things the way he does, he thought.

He had always run along the path laid out for a chosen one, so he could not recklessly believe in his own strength like Walter and Paul.

Nevertheless, he was now opposing the two of them.

And that was why he asked a nervous question.

"What would happen if I fought them head-on now?"

"If you used their way of doing things, you would lose."

"Then how am I supposed to fight?"

He leaned forward as he asked and Oscar fell briefly silent.

"Are you not satisfied with that previous fight?"

"I do not want to think that was my true ability. …I simply caught them off guard."

"Then what will you do when you fight with everything you have and still lose?"

This attack from an unexpected angle made Mayer look up. He found Oscar staring directly at him.

"If you are to fight them head-on, you will need to use everything you have. Even so, you may still lose. Can you endure that loss?"

What could he do if his own strength was rejected?

He had never used his full strength or experienced a loss, so he had no way of immediately answering that question.

However, he doubted Oscar was actually expecting an answer. The man slowly said something more.

"And if you still wish to fight after hearing all that, remember these words."

He took a breath.

"What matters most is determining what exactly it is you should be."

A moment of silence followed.

"Do you understand, Mayer?"

"…I do not."

Oscar nodded.

"You are still young, so take your time and give it plenty of thought. You do not need to rush yourself like those two."

Once Oscar crossed his arms, Mayer realized something.

"Those…two?"

"Hm?"

"No, um, I just mean… Don't you mean three?"

"What do you mean?"

The look in Oscar's eyes and his tone completely changed.

Mayer felt a chill run down his spine.

"When I faced the dp-XXX, there were three people in the cockpit."

"What!?"

"You mean three people didn't leave the ship!?"

Mayer had heard Walter's group had been taken into custody, but he had not heard the number of people. It had seemed so obvious an issue he had not bothered to ask.

"But only Walter and Paul spoke over the radio," groaned Oscar while wrinkling his brow.

Mayer realized what had happened.

The Bladlikburg had been too far from the dp-XXX to see inside, so they only had to avoid mentioning the third person's presence and then hide them.

They had not counted on Mayer noticing the third person, but that miscalculation had proved meaningless since he had not reported it.

"…!"

The two of them stood up simultaneously.

At the same moment, the Zwei's deck lit up outside the window .

"What!?"

The dp-XXX was preparing to take off.

One of its engines could not run with the Lanze still skewering it, but the other engine was fine. As long as it did not try anything too difficult, it could at least glide through the sky.

A few string-like objects shot through the moonlight on the deck. The wires holding down the dp-XXX were snapping at set intervals.

"Commander Oscar!" said a ship-wide announcement. "We have an emergency! Please hurry to the bridge!"

"Commander!" shouted Mayer.

"This was my oversight," clearly stated Oscar. "Do not worry about it."

"But!"

"You do your job. Besides, we have no fighter craft that can fly tonight."

With that, Oscar ran from the room. Mayer began to follow him but stopped. There was nothing a fighter pilot like him could do.

He looked out the window and saw the nearly full moon in the night sky.

It was the strength of its light that prevented them from scrambling the fighters. There was a danger of the engines losing control and destroying the fighters.

"Dammit."

Covered in that moonlight, the dp-XXX's nose quickly rose. Nothing was restraining it any longer.

That collection of advanced technology rotated and flew into the sky like a leaf in the wind.

"…!"

Mayer almost pressed against the glass to keep his eyes on the ship.

The Lanze skewering it glowed in the darkness and the clouds spread out below.

Small dots of light were visible far below the gaps in the clouds. Those were the lights of Berlin.

It took only a few seconds for the Lanze's light to dive between the gaps in the clouds and blend into the city's lights.

"They got us," muttered Mayer as he pulled his face from the window.

He then sighed and saw his own face reflected in the glass.

It was only when he saw his face that he realized something.

That reflected face contained a small but satisfied smile.

Part 3

The commotion caused by the dp-XXX's escape reached the interrogation room.

It was a small room with bare metal walls and the two men strapped to chairs exchanged a smile.

"Sounds like the young lady pulled it off."

"Sure does. At least we know the Kaiserburg won't be caught in the middle of this trouble with the military."

Walter faced forward and the interrogator across the table frowned back at him.

"What did you two do?"

"We didn't do anything. You all are the ones that overlooked something."

"Overlooked something?"

"I learned my lesson in the past, and gave the spaceship an emergency life support chamber."

"L-life support chamber!?"

The man seemed to have realized what had happened.

A life support chamber was a small space about the size of a coffin. If its equipment was activated with someone inside, they would be instantly half-frozen and put them into hibernation by a spray of cold gas.

"But the door is labelled 'danger' what with the cooling equipment inside, so an amateur isn't going to want to open it. That label isn't entirely accurate, though."

No one would be stupid enough to open it with that written on it. After all, the ship had been built with strange technology. It was unlikely the military had performed a thorough internal inspection .

That was exactly what Walter and Paul had been hoping for.

That was also why they had pretended to be the only two aboard over the radio.

Their gamble had paid off.

"They say savages fear advanced civilizations, but it looks like that's true."

Walter smiled pleasantly.

"Oscar really is easy to trick."

Part 4

A forest known as the Grunewald Forest was located on the northwest outskirts of Berlin. The Breuer Company's aircraft repair factory had been built inside it.

It was an old building. It had gone almost entirely unused since the Breuer Company had left the aircraft production industry.

Even past eight at night, an old man in a work outfit remained in the factory's office. He seemed to live there. The office table contained stacked dishes from dinner, half-eaten *käse*, and the knife used to eat it.

His legs were resting up on the table and his arms were crossed behind his head.

"There's nothing to do around here," he muttered leisurely. " And there used to be so much going on."

Ever since Hiram Maxim's first successful flight in 1894, airplanes had become an industry of their own. Business had slowed at one point, but ironically, it was a world war that had truly expanded the airplane market. Immediately after the war, the industry had only targeted the wealthy, but airplanes had later become a much more household means of transportation.

However, that prosperity had not lasted long.

A mere three years after the Breuer Company had shifted from the defense industry to the aircraft industry, a certain accident had occurred. That was fifteen years ago.

"If that hadn't happened, people wouldn't fear flying through the skies."

Currently, flight had become the exclusive realm of shipping along air routes and the military.

Airplanes were much less safe than cars or boats. The incident fifteen years before had been powerful enough to place that fear in everyone's hearts.

From that day onward, the civilian aircraft market had declined.

…In the old days…

He scratched his thinning hair.

"There was always the roar of engines coming from the airfield."

As soon as he forced a smile, the factory shook from a powerful blast of wind. A roar reverberated through his body as if some great mass was pressing down on him. The unpleasant creaking unique to old buildings reached him and his tilted chair almost fell backwards.

"!?"

…*Was that an aircraft?*

He frantically stood from the chair, thought for a moment, and corrected himself. It could not have been an aircraft. If it had been one, he would have heard the loud sound of a rocket or jet being fired.

"Was it just a gust of wind?" he muttered.

He sat back down and reached for the *käse* and knife on the table.

The office door burst open and a gust of wind blew in.

"Old Man Metz!"

The gust of wind was joined by a familiar voice and a familiar form.

It was Else.

"E-Else!? What are you doing out when it's so cold!?"

The girl used to visit the factory for fun, but now she approached the old man without responding or closing the door.

She moved quickly and she snatched the knife and *käse* from his hand.

"Old Man Metz. No, Breuer Company Aircraft Factory Manager Steinmetz. I want help repairing a ship."

She spoke quietly, ate the *käse* in her hand, and took a breath.

Her shoulders fell and the old man, Steinmetz, spoke.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

He sounded somewhat taken aback and Else seemed to understand why that would be.

"Well, Old Man Metz. I need you to understand."

She pointed at the old man's face. And she used the hand holding the knife.

"Hyah!"

Steinmetz leaned back in surprise and his chair fell backwards.

"Oh, whoops."

Else set down the knife and helped the man up.

"Else, what is going on? When you say a ship…do you mean an aircraft?"

"No."

"Then what do you mean?" he asked while brushing off his butt .

"A spaceship."

The old man could not contain his laughter at that unexpected answer.

"Pfa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Now that's a bad joke, Else! Like I can believe that!"

"Then look at this!"

Else walked over to the dew-covered window and threw it open .

A mass of metal sat outside.

"!"

Else turned around and clenched her fist with her back to what looked like a collection of steel organs. It almost looked like a wall sitting outside the window.

"I'm going to fly to space in this ship!"

She faced the old man with the winter night's wind on her back.

Steinmetz was at a loss for words.

He had stopped laughing. He had thought this was a young girl 's joke, but before he could make sense of anything, he had been shown this mass of steel.

The intensity of this fact complicated his thoughts.

When had something so large landed?

Why was Else talking about going to space?

How was he supposed to react?

"Ah…"

He tried to say something and forcibly calm himself, but it did not work. The beating of his heart only grew faster as Else stared directly at him.

Her gaze was telling him to believe in the facts before his eyes.

"You mean…"

Sweat ran down his brow. Even with the cold winter air blowing in through the open door and window, he was sweating. That was how tense he was.

He gulped a little and moved his lips.

"What are you trying to do?"

He barely managed to squeeze out that question and he looked away from Else. He instead looked at the ship outside the window.

He breathed a sigh of relief and sat back in his chair.

Else spoke calmly to him.

"There was an aerial battle over Berlin today, right?"

She quickly explained what had happened.

"And this is the ship that held its own against the air force."

Steinmetz focused on the mass of metal outside the window.

"Else, I'm going to ask again. You aren't joking about this, are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You really are…well, going to space with this?"

"Yes, of course. Only an idiot wouldn't go if they had the means ."

"Are you serious?"

Else nodded.

"I am."

Her tone was light, but her expression was serious. The fact that she said nothing more prevented him from investigating further.

"…"

He sighed and looked out the window again.

"I see," he muttered. "I don't really understand, but you can reach space in that ship, can you?"

"Yes."

"And you're asking me to fix it?"

"Yes. You're the only person who can do it."

"You're overestimating me."

His voice was filled with resignation, but his lips were smiling.

Else could not help but smile as well.

Suddenly, his eyes stopped on her expression.

"What is it?"

"Just a little thing. More importantly, Else, have you told your father?"

"I was about to go do that."

Her expression stiffened a little.

She pulled a black communicator from her coat pocket and held it out.

After a moment, he took it.

"What is this?"

"The ship will carry out simple actions if you give it orders with this. It's pretty smart."

"So it has voice recognition? That's pretty amazing."

He stared at the Kaiserburg.

"The times have changed."

"Times don't just change."

"What?'

"We have to change them."

Else closed the window.

"Can you do it?" she asked.

"Not on my own. I'll need three more people and one of them has to be an emblem engineer."

"Okay. Got it."

"Now hurry to your father. Get the permission to use some engineers and to do what you're trying to do."

She gave a powerful nod.

"I'm on my way."

With that, she turned around and ran from the office.

The old man smiled bitterly as he watched her go.

"How is Gaston going to greet her?"

Part 5

It was past nine as Gaston and Mayer walked down a hallway in the former's mansion.

"I apologize for the lack of hospitality."

"No, we are the ones who failed to show any courtesy."

"No, no. Compared to my daughter…"

"Your daughter?"

Gaston looked surprised.

"Oh, she is out right now."

"Is that so?"

There was no real question in Mayer's tone.

Gaston sighed.

"I'm not sure what to do with my daughter. She runs around enjoying herself every day and causes me nothing but trouble."

"What's wrong with that? She sounds like a cheerful person."

"She's less cheerful and more…"

Gaston trailed off.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

"?"

"It's sad how rarely I see her smile."

He smiled bitterly. The only time he had seen a surprisingly large smile on Else's face was when she had boarded that ship.

He asked the young man a question.

"Mr. Schrier, what do you think? I believe people must set aside all ridiculous things once they grow up."

The young man's expression remained calm.

"I was treating her as an adult. At twenty, all that remains is to prepare for entering society. She should have matured by now."

"…"

Gaston stopped in front of the main entrance.

"And yet she got herself involved in some nonsense and smiled as she did so."

Mayer also stopped and quietly listened to Gaston.

"But why did I tremble when I saw that smile?"

Gaston roughly brushed a hand through his hair.

At the same moment, the door opened and a woman stepped inside.

It was Else.

"!"

Gaston was dumbfounded and Mayer gave her a quick glance before nodding.

"Okay, Mr. Breuer. I will take my leave now."

He reached for the door Else had opened.

Else's eyes followed him, but he did not respond.

The door slowly closed and the outside air was cut off.

Gaston and Else remained in complete silence.

Part 6

Else was the first to speak.

She took a breath to calm herself first.

"Dad."

Her voice resounded clearly through the entranceway.

It was Gaston's voice that drowned it out.

"What have you been doing? Your disobedience is hardly new, but I cannot help you this time."

That was the usual line, but the exhaustion filling it was new. She must have noticed it because her expression changed slightly.

With an odd stillness on her face, she asked him a question.

"Would you believe me if I told you I was seriously thinking about going to space?"

Her words left her father speechless. He had just realized how she had returned and what she was trying to do.

"This is no time for jokes!" he emotionally shouted back.

He then took a breath and relaxed his tensed shoulders.

"Listen, Else. The man who once tried to go to space failed and became a star decorating the moon! No one has ever succeeded!"

"I know that."

"Why would you do something that could kill you!?"

"Because I believe I can do it."

"You just want to stand out! You can't risk your life for something so ridiculous! And not just that! You're troubling the military and spreading chaos through your country!"

"What does the country or military have to do with this?"

"Have you never thought about what it means for people to die! ? You will be killing people who have nothing to do with this!"

"Then why do you sell weapons!?"

"…!"

It was a sharp, painful statement.

Gaston started to reply but stopped.

He did have a reason to sell weapons: his daughter. But he could not say that here. If he did, it would include a dark meaning.

…If Else wasn't here, I wouldn't have sold those deadly weapons.

That was what it came down to. Anything he said would only sound like an excuse.

He had no choice but to accept her next statement head-on.

"Everyone does the same thing!"

Gaston's shoulders twitched as if from a spasm.

He did not know what to say.

At the same time, she began to move. She slowly lowered her hips, got down on one knee, and fixed the hem of her skirt. She placed one arm across her stomach, leaned forward, and bowed her head.

Her action contained no hesitation. It was a prepared and perfected act.

In noble etiquette, that was how a knight showed gratitude to his ruler, but the action was not even seen in royal palaces anymore.

After a while, she raised her head. Her expression was calm and still.

"I apologize for interrupting your busy schedule."

Her tone was relaxed and she did not stop.

Unable to say anything, Gaston bit his lip and listened to his daughter's voice.

"It would seem I asked too much of you, but this is very important to me. Two people have bet their lives on this issue and it will help me decide what to do with my own life."

"…"

"As president of the Breuer Company, please lend me some personnel. I beg you."

After that, she raised her head a little.

"I honestly want to do this myself, but it seems you can't reach space alone. I'm not just asking you. I want everyone's help!"

Hearing the uncontainable intensity in her voice, Gaston asked a reflexive question.

"Do you think everyone will work for your sake?"

"It isn't for my sake! It's for what I want to do! It's for going to space!"

"Mh…"

He frowned at that.

He had realized her desire was more than mere selfishness.

His daughter was trying to lead others and accomplish a goal.

He realized that action could also be expressed with the word " business".

However, realizing that fact meant accepting that Else was on the same level as him. It meant allowing her to leave him.

…Can I really allow that now!?

In order to hold her here and in order to test her, he asked one final question.

"Are you saying you can sacrifice others just as I do?"

Before answering, she stood and brought their eyes to equal height.

"I simply believe in the possibility of reaching space. This is a challenge that includes the possibility of my own failure."

As she answered, she gave an unreliable and yet strong-willed smile.

…Is she afraid?

Someone who would sacrifice others had to keep in mind the possibility of their own demise. Gaston knew the transaction was completed by that principle.

She was sacrificing others and herself in order to set a great number of people in motion and accomplish her own goal.

She had a real goal now. If someone like that began to move, there was no stopping them. Just as Gaston had never stopped selling weapons no matter what Else had said.

…*I see.*

He closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief.

And he muttered the words of his resolve.

"If I didn't help you, you would go running elsewhere, wouldn' t you?"

Part 7

The small interrogation room was surrounded by white walls with no windows. It only contained a metal door, a large table, and chairs.

On one side, the interrogator sat with his arms crossed.

On the other side, Walter and Paul sat in their chairs. The ropes binding them to the chairs had been removed once the dp-XXX had vanished into the darkness and not returned.

"Hmm."

Walter groaned and looked up at the ceiling with his usual expression.

"Ahh… It's almost the 24th, isn't it?"

To add to the mental pressure, the interrogation room had no clock.

Paul looked at Walter.

"You can tell the time?"

The question was relatively meaningless, but Walter nodded.

"I inherited my father's sense of time, so it's perfect. Want me to tell you the time down to the seconds?"

"Fine. What time is it now?"

"December 23, 11:32 PM and 18 seconds. There's no mistaking it ."

The interrogator pulled a pocket watch from his uniform pocket .

"That's not even close, you fool. It's 11:11 and 27 seconds."

Walter turned to Paul with a serious look.

"See, professor? I got the time for you."

"Yes. Well done."

"Idiots really are easy to trick."

Walter's tone seemed to finally clue the interrogator into what had happened.

"What!?"

He briefly grew pale, but his face was red with rage a moment alter.

"Do you have any idea what position you are in here!?"

"Do you? It would probably be a good idea to let us go sooner rather than later."

"That's right. If you go home, you can help prepare for *Weihnachts* with your wife, whose personality is her only decent quality, and your kid, who excels in athletic ability and nothing else. A happy family sure is nice."

" 'Sure is nice'!? I could be living that kind of life if *you two* would hurry up and confess everything!"

"Confess everything, you say?" Walter sighed. "Well, okay. Here's everything about me: my height is 187 cm, my weight is 72 kg, my hobby is astronomy, my favorite food is *rippchen*, my favorite drink is *moselwein*, on Sundays I visit used book stores-…"

"No one asked for any of that!"

"But you did just now."

"That's right. You're contradicting yourself."

The two crossed their arms and nodded.

The interrogator held his head and collapsed onto the table.

"Are you okay? If you want someone to deliver the finishing blow, just ask."

"…I do not need that."

His voice was low and he slowly sat back up.

"Oh, he can still move. Maybe we should've messed with him some more."

"Silence!"

"…"

"Not completely silent!"

"You really are contradicting yourself."

"This guy really isn't very smart. And he's surprisingly weak-willed for an interrogator."

"This would happen to anyone who has to deal with you two!"

After slowly standing up, the interrogator glared at the other two men.

"I'm going to use the truth serum."

"On yourself? I suppose everyone is aware on some level of what they've done wrong. I'm willing to lend you my ear as you confess it all. But I will ask that you draw up a receipt."

"Walter, this guy has no sense of humor, so just stop."

"It's cute when a woman does it. When she shouts 'I can't allow that!' and beats you softly on the chest, it just makes you want to at least rub her head."

" 'At least'? Where else are you planning to rub her?"

"We can leave that unsaid."

"Shut up!"

The interrogator shouted and slammed his fist against the table. He glared at the other two with his face so red it looked like steam was going to rise from it.

"You two!"

"Yes?"

"Don't think you'll get away with this! I'll use truth serum, torture, or whatever it takes to get all the information you have!"

"Don't you think guys with too powerful a sense of duty are hard to deal with, Walter?"

"I know what you mean. They shouldn't get so heated up. And besides, if you're announcing you're going to do those things ahead of time, wouldn't that mean you aren't confident they'll actually work?"

"You two had better remember this."

"I wouldn't have gone to university if I had a bad memory."

"Shut up! I'll show you what I can do! Just you wait!"

"Um, if this is going to take long, can you bring us some books or something to kill the time?"

Before Walter had even finished speaking, the interrogator had vanished through the metal door. The door slammed shut behind him and they heard the lock click.

Walter and Paul exchanged a glance.

"He sure is short-tempered."

"We've been surrounded by people like that lately."

"Else's probably having a hard time down below. Her father looked pretty stubborn."

"Her, hm?"

Paul looked Walter in the eye.

"What do you think?"

"Are you asking if she's my type?'

"No."

"I know, I know." Walter nodded. "She will definitely return here with almost 100% certainty. I wouldn't have left the Kaiserburg with her if I thought otherwise."

"You sound certain."

"Honest people like her…"

He hesitated because he was unsure how to put it.

"I guess you could say they're never satisfied until they return what they've borrowed."

"Tell me what you really think."

Walter smiled at the hint of harshness in Paul's voice.

"Do I really have to when it's so obvious? She's the same as us. Once she takes the first step, she'll break into a run, leap, and end up here."

His eyes faced straight forward as he said that.

The look in them was filled with confidence.

Part 8

The night was beginning to fill with a deep chill as well as darkness. It was 10:30 PM.

The front entrance of the Breuer mansion opened a little.

The light extending into the yard was blocked by a human shadow. It was Else's shadow.

She carried a rucksack over her shoulder and closed the door behind her.

No one was there to see her off and no one watched her from the house. After making sure the door was closed, she faced forward and began to walk.

"…"

After a few steps, she came to a sudden stop.

She had noticed someone standing in the darkness.

It was a man wearing a plain-colored coat.

His blond hair had blended into the darkness, but it began to shine dully once the moon came out.

The young man was revealed below the moonlight. He was a soldier. Specifically, he was the man who had left the mansion when Else had arrived.

His breath appeared white as he spoke.

"Did you fly down to Berlin in the dp-XXX?"

"Yes, I did."

As she answered, she pulled a submachine gun from her rucksack and aimed it at the soldier. She had already released the safety.

"I used it to escape. So what are you going to do? Arrest me?"

The young man gently raised his hands.

"I only waited here because I wanted to talk."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Isn't the fact that I waited alone without calling for reinforcements enough proof?"

"Would you believe me if I said this submachine gun can't fire? This is the same."

"Then I will believe what you say."

Mayer stepped forward with his hands still raised. He slowly took step after step toward Else.

She watched him with her finger still on the trigger.

"Stop there."

By the time she said that, he was only two or three steps away from her.

"You have guts."

She sounded surprised and she did not lower the gun. He approached no further and nodded.

"Can the dp-XXX fly again?"

"Eh?"

"My upperclassman and teacher built that ship, so I want to know if it will fly again."

Else met Mayer's gaze when she heard that. She saw a powerful light in the young officer's eyes. He was truly worried about the dp-XXX.

"I see. You must be Mayer, Walter's underclassman that piloted that black fighter."

She smiled bitterly and nodded.

"The Kaiserburg will be fully repaired within three days. I can even guarantee it with the skill of the Breuer Company."

Mayer breathed a sigh of relief. Noticing his hands starting to lower, Else re-aimed the submachine gun and he raised his hands again.

"Why are you trying to fly the dp-XXX again? Wouldn't you be satisfied with a normal life?"

His tone had a hint of testing her and she suddenly smiled in the darkness.

"Satisfied with a normal life?" She took a breath. "I suppose it would be nice to live a normal life without all this. I could take it easy in university, get married, have two or three kids, and play with those kids by the lake here. …That *would* be a happy life."

"Then…"

Before he could ask why, Else shook her head.

"But I don't want that! If I chose that life, I could never look up into the sky again. Would you be fine with that?"

What did she see in those words?

"I see."

Mayer sighed, closed his eyes, and nodded.

"You really do want to go to space, don't you?"

"You don't?"

It took a moment for him to answer.

"I…do not want to go to space."

"Why not?"

"Because that is what my upperclassman and you want, not what I want."

"Then why did you ask if the Kaiserburg would fly again?"

Her question seemed to bite back at him and he answered in tone that said not even he could believe what he was saying.

"Because I want to fight all of you."

That was a quiet declaration of war.

Chapter 6: The Legend Soars

Part 1

12/25/1935

It was 5:25 AM and the Kaiserburg filled a large factory. The large machine tools such as cranes and winches had only been used to remove the Lanze skewering one of the engines, so they were now pushed up against the wall.

Thirty hours had already passed since the repairs had begun.

The wound to the engine was deep, but it was on the way to a full recovery with the help of the ship's own self-repair ability and the Breuer Company's technicians.

The Kaiserburg itself simply hovered as if none of that mattered .

An old man stood next to it. He was Steinmetz.

He looked up at the ship and heard the voices of the younger technicians repairing it on the inside. The ship was sealed, but the factory was so quiet he could still just barely hear them.

He could tell they were excitedly discussing something. It seemed to be an argument over the mysteries and problems with the ship.

A ship that could fly to space would have to be endlessly fascinating.

"…"

He had a sudden thought.

…Space, huh?

He loved airplanes and flying through the sky. His interest in that would never wane. That was why he remained in this abandoned factory.

He had spent forty years with airplanes now.

In that time, he had come to realize that this was exactly where he belonged.

And there was something he needed to do now. The girl who had come to play here when she was young had grown up and was asking for his help.

She had a single goal: flying this ship to space.

"A lot of people would think it's impossible."

But they could not let that discourage them.

If this test succeeded, it would undoubtedly usher in a new age.

Steinmetz stood at the source of that.

Some people would race ahead to make this crazy idea a reality, but others had to support them. They both needed each other and all either of them could do was what they needed to do.

Repairing the Kaiserburg was his only way of assisting their journey to space, but that was something only he could do.

"…"

Strength filled his gaze and his silently wandering eyes looked up at the ship.

Suddenly, a face poked out from below it and short blonde hair dangled down. It belonged to Else who was working on the lower wiring.

She looked to him, briefly pulled her head back in, and lowered her legs down.

With her boots, work outfit, work gloves, and short hair, she did not at all look like the daughter of a wealthy family. In fact, she had oil stains all over her clothes and face.

"I've replaced the lower wiring and non-emblem panels. How much longer on the exterior?"

"If that's all you're doing, you should finish in another five or six hours."

"Geh. …I've still got that much to do?"

"This ship is not like any we've worked on before. And the exterior is far from uniform, so it requires a lot of parts. …But I'll help from here on. Together, we can cut the time in half."

"Thanks."

"You've been working since last night. Aren't you tired?"

She shook her head.

"Not at all. I'm not sure how to put it, though."

She lightly turned back toward the Kaiserburg.

"Maybe this is what it feels like for a carpenter to build his own house."

"His own house?"

Steinmetz frowned. The Kaiserburg was an aircraft or an aerial ship. It essentially had no living areas.

Even so, the young woman in a work outfit spread her arms as if to embrace the ship.

"Don't you think making your own place in the world is great?"

She turned around and showed him her bright smile.

The old man was taken aback by the term "place in the world".

For him, that term referred to airplanes.

…I get it now.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Else changed the subject.

"Oh, right. What did you find out about the Lanze after removing it?"

That lance of light had stabbed into the Kaiserburg. The odd weapon was a bullet made of ether yet it retained its form without naturally scattering into its surroundings.

Steinmetz pulled a small piece of metal from his work outfit's breast pocket.

It was shaped exactly like the bullet portion of an 8mm round.

"This is the true identity of that lance."

"Eh? That is?"

He nodded.

"Normally, large weapons like fighter craft will have a field emitter installed which fires the bullets. The bullets are made entirely out of ether, so they will dissolve into the raw ether floating in the air and eventually disappear."

"But this one had a core?"

"Yes. As far as I can tell, the surface is covered in tiny emblems. You could probably fire this thing from that machinegun you carry

around. The bullet is entirely supported from within using the emblems carved into it, so it's just as powerful as a Schwert. …No, given its speed, it would be even more powerful."

"Let me see it."

He handed it to her and she stared at the bean-sized bullet.

"I see. It's made from a spirit stone."

"Yes. It works just like this ship's engines. Any impact to the flat bottom end will trigger the emblems to gather ether in a lance shape. It's a lot like a miniature version of…what was it called again? Oh, right. A Panzer Emblem."

"The military's been working hard to make something like this."

She smiled bitterly and looked Steinmetz in the eye.

"The soldiers have a tough time too."

"What?"

"After a discussion, I promised to meet one of them up in the sky."

She toyed with the Lanze bullet in her fingers.

"Can I borrow this?"

"Hm? I don't mind, but don't use it for anything you shouldn't. "

"Sure. I was just thinking I could use it for something fun."

"I'm pretty sure that falls under the category of things you shouldn't use it for."

Part 2

It was 6:30 AM and the morning began early in Germany.

Even after rising above the clouds, the sun had yet to come out.

The Flammen Ritter rose in a straight line as purple filled the sky.

He was testing the fighter's ascension ability.

The roar of the engine filled the fighter. It was still weak, but the moon was out. The Flammen Ritter had been given some moonlight resistance, but it was not perfect. The fighter shook.

Mayer faced the moon from the cockpit.

His body was pressed into the back of the chair. He had trouble breathing, but not enough to pass out.

His thoughts were clear and a single idea filled his mind.

How could he fight Walter and the others?

"Why am I hesitating?"

When he had said he wanted to fight the night before last, Else had asked him a question.

"You're just afraid of losing, aren't you!? But you also know how skilled you are, so you aren't prepared to go all out and crush your opponent!"

That was definitely true.

"You think someone like that can fight us? I have something that is mine alone, but what do you have!?"

She had taken a breath.

"You've done nothing but borrow from others, so you have no right to stop us!"

Her harsh words had shocked him.

They had also reminded him of what Oscar had told him.

…What matters most is determining what exactly it is you should be.

Her words had told him exactly what that had meant.

He was not Walter. Nor was he Paul or Oscar. In that case, who should he be?

That answer would give him the meaning for his fight.

…But how should I fight?

This was not like the tests and training he had completed in the past. This was a competition that would have a clear result. If he lost, he would lose everything.

Why did he hope for a fight he had no confidence he could win?

He accelerated his fighter craft. To continue rising, he had to continue accelerating.

The needle slowly moved across the gauge. He was already higher than during the previous test.

The sky was growing bluer and deeper.

He accelerated further.

The sky outside the window was nearly indigo already, he saw the stars in the distance, and the altitude needle had reached the red danger zone.

The Flammen Ritter shook, but he ignored the disconcerting tremor.

He accelerated. His speed had dropped quite a bit because the earth's gravity had ensnared him.

The altitude needle had reached the far side of the gauge.

…Should I give up here?

He saw the moon in the heavens far above the sky. The ship's ability to rise would be about at its limit.

Its acceleration was weakening.

"Is this really enough?"

His question to himself was immediately followed by an incoming transmission.

"Mayer, you have ascended quite a bit. You have set an excellent record."

It was Oscar.

Mayer asked a question on reflex.

"Commander Oscar, how should I fight the dp-XXX?"

He blatantly revealed his worries.

After a short silence, the other man replied.

"Mayer, do you have no intention of testing your own ability?"

"!"

…Testing!?

He almost felt like this was his first time to hear that word.

…Why do I want to fight?

I don't care if I lose. I want to fight so I can test what I can do when I go all out!

He was certain to learn that if he fought Walter's group. He would directly take on the person he respected and had set as his own goal.

Through that battle, he could confirm just how far he could go.

"!"

Strength filled his gut.

He forced a large burst of acceleration from the Flammen Ritter.

"Mayer! Do not force yourself!"

"I'm fine!"

His tone was strong as he responded.

His fingertips operated the field emitters. With a slight sound, glowing ether wrapped around the fighter craft.

The fighter stopped shaking and only solidified flames were visible though the cockpit windows.

"Activating Panzer Emblem – Flammen Lanze! I'm ascending even more!"

With a lurch of impact, the Flammen Ritter rose intensely into the sky.

Mayer smiled as he endured the inertia of the acceleration.

Part 3

At 8:38 AM, the sun had risen to a certain extent. The sky was clear and filled with just enough of a chill to tense the skin. A cold fog covered the Grunewald Forest.

A single car was parked in the forest's airfield and a man stood next to it. It was Gaston.

His shoulders shook once and he sighed.

He began to walk with his face pointed straight forward.

His gaze was on the giant factory. Its large door was open and the nose of a ship could be seen within.

"She really is doing this, isn't she?"

He approached, and saw a man crouched below the ship with some kind of diagram in one hand. Gaston recognized the man. He was the old man in charge of the factory.

"Steinmetz!" he called out and quickened his pace.

The other man seemed to notice Gaston's voice because he set the diagram on the floor, paused, and raised a hand.

"Oh, Gaston."

He tapped his back as he stood up and Gaston asked him a question.

"How is Else doing?"

"She's checking the course in the office."

"I see."

He was relieved that his daughter was still so nearby even if she was planning to leave him. She wanted to eventually fly into the sky and travel as far from this earth as she could.

"She's a good girl."

"I think you mean rebellious."

"No, it isn't often you find someone who looks so at home in a work outfit."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment? I raised her to be the daughter of a respectable family."

"Are hard workers not respectable?"

"I just want the Breuer family to be respectable."

The old man smiled bitterly at that.

"She's quite something. She did almost all of the external wiring and exterior on her own. She went two nights without sleep to do it."

"She did that much?"

The old man scratched his head and nodded.

"Well, she messed some of it up, but I fixed it for her."

"Sorry for the trouble."

"Don't be. Getting this ship to fly is an important job."

He looked up into Gaston's eyes from below.

"Do you think it's important, too?"

Gaston hesitated but responded clearly.

"I do." He lowered his gaze a little. "This ship might end up filling the world with trouble. It could even start a war and that could destroy the world."

He took a breath and looked back up at the ship in front of him.

"But…"

"But?"

"If the world would be destroyed by something like that, is there any point in letting it continue to exist? I feel like whatever place survives this will be a suitable place for Else and the people who can keep up with them."

That really sounds like something a weapons maker would say, he thought.

"This may be a harsh thing to say…but the age we live in is definitely going to change."

"Ha ha ha. That isn't something that just changes. We have to change it ourselves."

"Oh? Well said."

"I got that one from your daughter."

"Else said that?"

"A nice saying, isn't it?"

"She was just trying to sound mature."

He just about smiled as he said that, but he restrained himself.

"She's an interesting girl," said the old man. "She cut her hair because of that incident, right?"

"Yes, she blew up the fireworks during the school festival last year."

"I hear that was a sight to see."

"Never before in the history of the University of Berlin has a student blown up the statue of the university president. I had to go apologize."

"Sounds a lot like you used to be," commented Steinmetz. "The way both corners of her mouth rise when she smiles looks exactly like your smile. When I saw her smile like that earlier, it reminded me of something."

"What was that?"

"Back in the day, you used to look that happy when you smiled too."

"…!"

That line shocked Gaston.

He had wanted Else to smile.

"Back in the day?"

His voice may have been trembling as he asked that question.

"It was fifteen years ago. Didn't you have a habit of visiting this factory to watch the planes fly? And you brought your young daughter with you."

"…"

It all came back to him.

…He might be…right.

Else had smiled so innocently back then and he may have as well.

"How about it? Can you look up into sky again? No, can you look up to a place even higher than the sky?"

"…"

"Personally, I'm having a blast doing this."

Gaston nodded.

…Having a blast, huh?

"You're right," he said. "Maybe I should do what I can."

Part 4

At 10:07 AM, the Bladlikburg was silent, but it was not peaceful. It was simply unable to move after losing track of the dp-XXX the night before last.

The bridge was filled with the sounds of normal work and communications conversations, but no actions stood out.

Surrounded by that unnerving stillness, Oscar frowned in front of the phone on the wall.

"Are you saying not even the truth serum was any use?"

It took a several seconds to receive an answer and he sighed as he listened to it.

"Do not let it get to you. They are scholars who are used to long nights. Their level of focus is on a different level from ours. Show them our true strength that does not rely on such things."

The person on the other end must have expressed their understanding because he asked a businesslike question.

"You understand, don't you?"

He took a breath.

"Do not force yourself too much."

After a quick word of confirmation, he set down the receiver.

"What is it?" asked someone behind him.

He turned toward it and found Mayer holding a pile of documents.

"Did those two do something again?"

He sounded a little amused as he asked.

"They are a troublesome bunch," replied Oscar.

"They probably see you as the troublesome one."

"Do not be ridiculous."

"Yes, sir. I should not have said that."

"…But I have no choice but to do this."

"What?"

Mayer did not seem to have heard the other man's muttered words, but Oscar did not mind.

"More importantly, how are you doing?"

"Oh. Yes, sir. I have now tested the Flammen Ritter's weapons under all circumstances: low altitude, normal altitude, high altitude, extremely high altitude, with and without an angle of elevation, in the early morning moon, and in the wind resistance of movement. I have the report on the results here."

"Excellent work."

"It wasn't all that much. The results are as follows: the error in field emitter targeting during sudden turns is only 0.2 degrees and the prototype Panzer Emblem activated properly. It is much more stable than the previous fighter craft."

"Can you defeat the dp-XXX?"

The young officer thought for a moment with the report in hand .

"As the dp-XXX is now…"

He hesitated, looked up, and spoke.

"I most likely can."

"As it is now?"

"Yes, sir. In other words, I can defeat the dp-XXX as it was when we captured it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Based on the battle records, its current form is only made for long-range combat. Its greatest advantage in long-range combat is its warship-level firepower and its mobility that exceeds that of a fighter craft."

"I see."

"But I believe the Flammen Ritter's acceleration is equal to or even greater than the dp-XXX's. If I attack that ship that has no close-range ability…"

"You can use that acceleration to fly right up to it?"

Mayer nodded.

"Correct. It takes a short time for its Kunst to activate, so it cannot use it for a one-on-one battle. And I can use my Schwert to cut through the Kugel it fires. All I have to do is charge right in."

"That is easier said than done."

"Yes, but that is the only way to win. I would not have stood a chance against its close-range combat form from before it evolved, but there is an opening now."

"…"

"What do you think?"

Oscar looked into Mayer's eyes as the young man asked.

There was strength in those eyes that had not been present before.

And so he nodded.

"I will leave this to you."

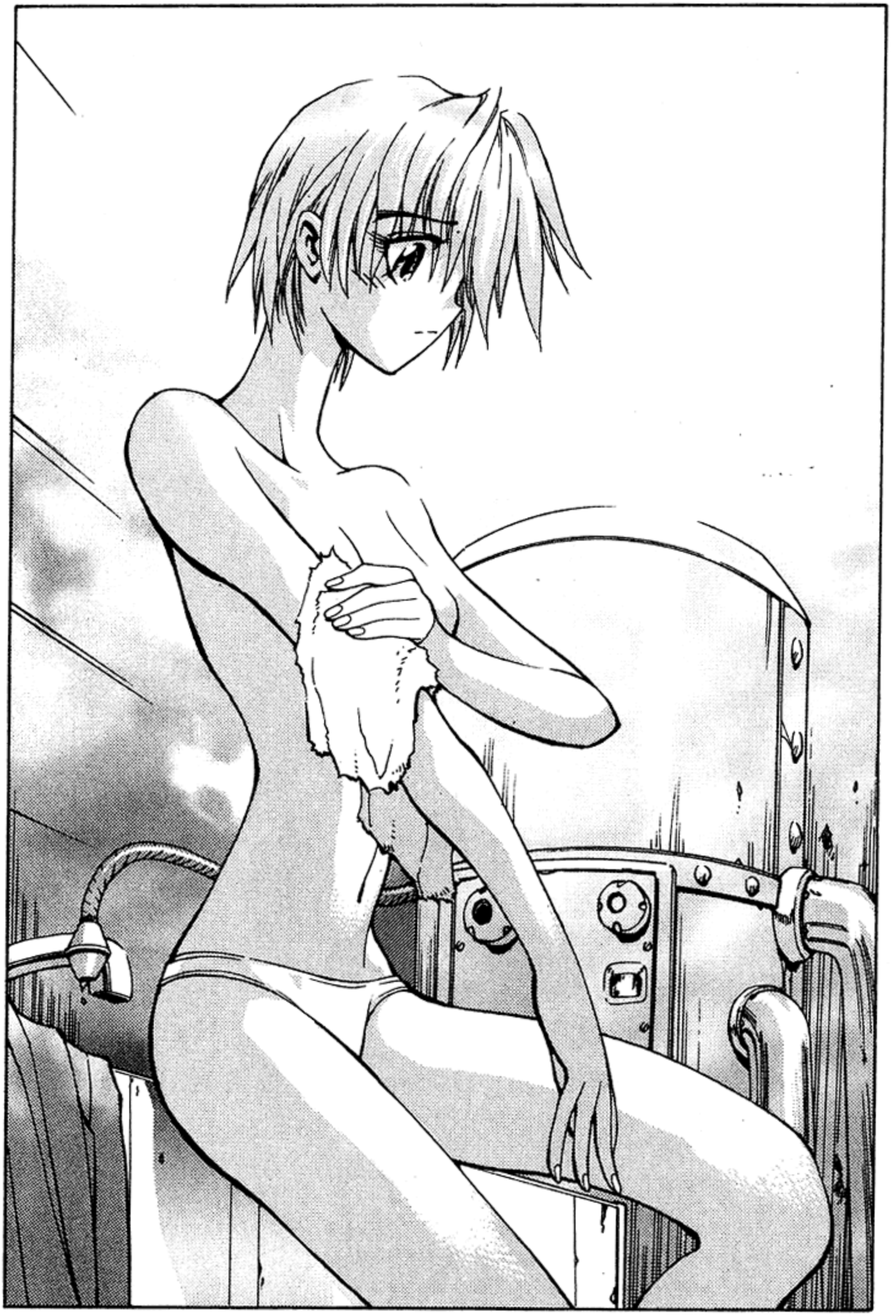
There was a somewhat cheerful tone to his voice.

Part 5

It was 12:51 PM.

The factory's office was surprisingly large. Six simple but large desks were lined up to form a rectangle and two old but large stoves were installed by the wall. The factory was cold during the winter.

Else brushed a hand through her hair in front of the mirror near the office entrance.



She had just gone to the trouble of washing her hair with the water heater in the break room and she was wiping the sweat from her body with a towel.

She had needed to do that before changing in the office.

Her work uniform was folded on top of one of the break room chairs. The lack of curtains on the window had bothered her when she had removed it, but the stoves had fogged up the window.

"And I doubt anyone's stupid enough to peep."

She sounded almost disappointed as she put on the stockings balled up in her hand and looked to the desk behind her. She had brought a change of clothes along with the submachine gun and other daily necessities.

She unfolded the clothes and put on a blouse with puffy shoulders. Her damp hair caught on the hard collar.

"Maybe I should get it cut again," she muttered while looking back in the mirror. "Why isn't there a mirror big enough to see my entire body?"

…Well, I guess there wouldn't be one in a factory.

With that thought, she reached for the rest of the clothes on the table.

They were all a sandy yellow color because that was the color worn by an explorer she had seen in an old magazine.

"Now, then."

She grabbed the skirt first. The waist was long. It used two belts to keep it tight around the area from just below her chest to the bottom of her abdomen.

She spread it out and suddenly remembered something.

She recalled what Gaston often said to her when complaining.

" 'You childish girl.' "

…That may be true.

She nodded.

She was about to board a ship and pick a fight with the military. Having a skirt fluttering around as she did so would be careless. There were better and more functional outfits to wear into battle that would let her move more easily.

But…

"I am a woman. Why should I dress like I'm not?"

That was right.

She had not chosen this outfit because she was not taking this seriously or because she was joking around.

She had chosen it and brought it with her because it was the outfit she thought fit her the best.

"Don't worry."

There was nothing to worry about and no reason to be nervous.

Soon, she had to soar up into the sky and fight.

The night before last, she had made a promise to the young man who had said he wanted to fight even as he hesitated.

"We'll be waiting for you up in the sky."

He had responded just before leaving.

"I will definitely make it to where you all are."

She was certain they could both keep their promises.

"This will settle it."

She nodded and put on the skirt.

She put the two belts around her waist and stepped back. The mirror only showed her upper body, but she brought her waist into view by moving away and stretching upwards. She then tightened the belts.

After retightening them two or three times, she took a breath.

She slowly reached for the pocket of the shirt sitting on the table .

"Can I do it right?"

She tilted her head as she picked up the object in the pocket.

It was pale lipstick.

Part 6

At 2:37 PM, a single soldier entered the interrogation room.

Paul, Walter, and the interrogator who had already gotten to know them were inside, so there were now four people in the small room.

The soldier looked at the other three and spoke.

"What are you three doing?"

The two prisoners were collapsed on the table sleeping and the interrogator was glaring at them with his arms crossed.

The interrogator turned to the soldier.

"These two are crazy."

"I can see that. No one normal could sleep in a situation like this ."

"Not that! How can they sleep after we injected them with truth serum? Who was it that said scholars are the most intellectual of people!? Their focus or willpower or whatever you want to call it is on the level of a giant beast!"

"Is that so?" The soldier did not seem to entirely understand, so he gave an arbitrary nod. "Then you should have used the kind of truth serum used for elephants."

"There's no point. Do you know what they said before going to sleep? They said you can fight truth serum by focusing your mind and strengthening your will. That's when they started focusing on sleeping."

"I see."

After another arbitrary nod, the soldier circled behind the sleeping men.

"It doesn't really matter, but I was ordered to send them into separate cells."

"Separate cells?"

"Yes. It seems someone will be coming to rescue them, so the commander said we need to keep them separated."

"I see. Then…"

"Don't worry. The commander does not think you did anything wrong here."

"But…"

"It's fine. And you're tired, aren't you? You can't interrogate them looking like that."

"I'm not… I am not tired."

"Saying that's proof enough that you are. But can you help me carry them to their cells?"

"Sure."

The interrogator stood and gently shook his weary head.

"I'll take the young one."

He moved behind Walter.

"Are you sure you can manage?"

"This isn't much."

"But you seemed to be having a lot trouble with them."

"They are insane. I have no idea what they're thinking."

"Really?"

"They have no problem doing things hardened criminals wouldn't do."

"Now you're just trying to scare me."

"I'm serious. Honestly…."

With that, he shook Walter's shoulder.

"Hey, wake up."

"Mh…"

The young man's eyebrows moved a bit.

The interrogator grabbed his shoulders and pulled him up.

"Are you awake yet?"

The young scholar opened his narrowed eyes a little.

"I've been staying up all night recently, so just five more minutes."

He closed his eyes and about collapsed back onto the desk.

"Don't go back to sleep!"

The interrogator frantically stuck his hands beneath Walter's arms to support him. As he did, one hand happened to slip inside the front of the young scholar's lab coat.

As soon as it did, Walter's expression changed. His previously blank look grew distinct.

The interrogator's hand had touched the photograph in his coat' s inner pocket.

"Don't touch that!"

His elbow shot up on reflex and smashed into the other man's jaw.

With a dull sound, the interrogator moved back from Walter and collapsed without even a chance to scream. He was clearly not getting up any time soon. He probably had no idea what had happened to him and his eyes closed from both the blow and his accumulated exhaustion.

Walter stood, looked down at the man, and sighed.

All of a sudden, he heard a gunshot.

"!"

Walter's body lifted slightly into the air.

He had been shot.

This was similar to the events on the bridge. Back then, Oscar had placed a hand on his side arm, but things played out differently here. Oscar had realized Walter's action was a misunderstanding, but this soldier had not.

Walter slowly fell to his knees.

And someone stood next to him.

"You son of a bitch!"

The soldier who had reflexively responded to the attack on his fellow soldier swore at Walter.

The handgun he held was trembling ever so slightly.

Part 7

At the same time, a single ship rose from the forest southwest of Berlin.

The people seeing it off said nothing and simply waved at the ship that might never return.

No one could say how this incident would end or who was in the right.

Chapter 7: The Legend Rises

Part 1

At 2:51 PM, Oscar watched the sky from the Bladlikburg's bridge.

Mayer stood behind him to provide a report on the incident.

However, Oscar did not turn around. He continued facing forward as he responded.

"I never thought this would happen."

He heard Mayer move behind him.

"It was a mistake to remain armed at all times."

He nodded at his aide's comment and asked a question.

"How is he?"

"First aid is complete and he is being taken to the infirmary."

"How is his injury?"

That was what he wanted to know.

"Oh," said Mayer before answering. "My apologies. The bullet penetrated his right forearm. The state of the bone is unknown, but I would guess it is broken. The shot was at close range and he has not trained his body."

"Most likely."

"It seems his life is not in danger, so you can rest easy on that count."

"Rest easy, hm?"

He smiled bitterly.

"I suppose so."

Ever since hearing the report, he had been worried about his enemy's well-being.

…*Why is that?*

They both had something they had to do, even if those two things were polar opposites.

He had to determine once and for all which one of them was right.

Normally, it would be Oscar since he was thinking of his nation and its people.

But what if one looked at it from the viewpoint of personal dreams?

What if acting on those dreams could change the world, change what was normal, and even change people?

…*Which one of us is right?*

He suddenly realized something.

…*I am hoping that the dp-XXX comes here.*

He had planned to hide that ship until the time came and he still hoped to do so if possible.

But the coming confrontation would determine the future course of the world.

"Mayer."

He wanted to say "win", but he swallowed the word.

He did not know why.

It was possible he too hoped that the dp-XXX would make it to space.

However, he could not allow that. As a father and as a soldier, he had a family to protect and men under his command. He had to eliminate anything that would harm them.

"…"

He bit his lip.

At that moment, he heard a roar.

Countless sounds much like bursting gunpowder reached his ears.

They came from outside, so he slightly lowered his gaze as he looked out the window.

"!"

The Bladlikburg Zwei floating in front of him was being struck by a series of Kugel. The Kugel had come from far below and more were coming.

The enemy had suddenly attacked with their full strength.

The repeating sounds of impact reverberated in his gut.

"Enemy ship detected! A single unidentified ship is attacking!"

The navigator's voice filled the bridge just as the Zwei's giant form burst into flames.

…Here it is!

There was no need to confirm who this was, so he gave a shout.

"It is the dp-XXX! All hands, prepare for battle! Scramble all fighters with the highest danger level equipment! This is all-out war!"

Part 2

It was 2:54 PM.

The Bladlikburg's infirmary was a tidy white room. Other than the beds by the window, it only had shelves of medical equipment and a treatment table.

In that room, Walter and Paul faced the medical officer.

"Hm."

The medical officer gave a quick nod while examining Walter's arm as the young man lay on the table.

"The bullet passed through quite cleanly. You were lucky. As long as you don't move it, it should stop bleeding soon."

"Isn't that great, Walter?"

"What about the bone?" asked Walter.

"It was hit quite nicely. It's broken and it should take two months for a full recovery."

"Now that's a problem. I won't be able to do anything scholarly."

"How is that any different from normal?"

"Um, you there? Please don't provoke the patient."

"Don't worry. My big heart is immune to damage."

"Doesn't that just mean you're callous?"

"How rude. The only real callouses on my body are on my feet."

"That's not what I meant!" shouted Paul.

Suddenly, they heard a rumbling from outside.

It was the low yet sharp sound of destruction.

"Eh?"

Walter looked around pointlessly.

At the same time, the battle preparation alarm filled the Bladlikburg.

The earsplitting noise filled the infirmary and a panicked voice made a ship-wide broadcast.

"Enemy ship approaching! Enemy ship approaching! We are now engaged in combat! Prepare the Soldat unit for launch and all gunners to your stations!"

Another rumbling reached them.

And this time it continued again and again.

The noise shook the walls and their bodies.

This was the sound of bullets hitting the metal armor.

"Wh-what?"

The medical officer stood up and the Bladlikburg Eins lurched from another hit.

"!"

Walter looked to Paul and Paul reflexively jumped onto the bed and pressed against the stationary window.

"How is it, professor!?"

"Wait! What do you two think you're-…"

"Shut up, doc!" shouted Paul.

His voice was loud enough to drown out the rumbling outside and the alarm filling the ship. And his voice contained a hint of joy .

"Dammit… Is the little lady here? I can't see!"

The Eins shook again and medicine bottles on the shelves loudly clinked together.

Paul pressed his face against the window in his attempt to peer out.

"…"

"Well, professor? Is it the Kaiserburg?"

"I still can't see very well."

"C'mon, find it already."

"Oh, shut u-…ahhh!!"

"Eh?"

Walter received a definitive answer to his question.

"There it is!"

Paul's voice was filled with delight.

"It's here!"

Walter held his injured arm, stood up, and stared intently at the wall he could not see through.

Based on Paul's posture, the Kaiserburg had to be flying alongside the Eins.

Walter began to approach the window to check on it, but then Paul said something odd.

"Hm? The Kaiserburg's turning its nose this-… Whoa!"

He frantically moved away from the window.

A moment later, the window and the entire wall vanished.

With a great roar, a Kugel fired by the Kaiserburg tore the wall away.

Light burst and noise exploded.

"!"

"Watch out!"

The difference in air pressure blew everything outside. Pillars and panels made of iron and steel were torn away and tossed into the empty sky. The noise was enough to hurt their ears.

The beds were spat outside like paper and the white sheets spread out in the sky before being blown away. The paper and books on the desk danced across the floor and into the sky.

The room's warm air came in contact with the cold wind of the high altitude and produced an icy mist.

A violent gust of wind danced through the room that was now directly connected to the sky.

In an instant, the infirmary was reduced to ruins.

The window-side wall and the beds were gone, so it was nothing but a treatment table and the edge of a cliff.

The medical officer shouted over the harsh wind.

"Wh-what the hell was that!?"

"A Kugel obviously."

The Kaiserburg probably had no idea Walter and Paul were in here. It had simply opened a horizontal hole for them to escape through.

Paul had jumped from the bed to the treatment table at the last second and he sighed.

"That little girl is crazy."

Even as he spoke, the floor below the table crumbled.

With a sound like rocks hitting each other, the floor scattered fragments and broke apart. The table tilted and then fell.

Still looking like he did not know what was happening or what was going to happen, Paul sat on the table and fell. Only his shrill scream remained.

"Ahhhhhhhh!"

Their parting only took an instant.

Some white sheets remained in the air and fluttered lightly as if saying goodbye, but they were quickly carried away by the wind.

Walter stood speechless on the cliff's edge.

The medical officer stood behind him.

"…"

After a short silence, the medical officer gave a shout. He had likely been unable to bear the silence.

"Wh-what!?"

"It's the sky. You've seen it before, haven't you?"

"That's not what I was asking!"

"Hm. From an objective point of view, the ship was hit, the wall was destroyed, and someone fell out. But the person who fell is a bit of a unique kind of person, so I doubt that's enough to kill him. Don't worry about it."

Even as he answered the medical officer's shouted question, Walter looked down at his injured arm.

The forearm was bent a bit about halfway down. It was broken and a fingertip-sized hole continued to the other side. The bleeding must have resumed because a blood stain appeared on his lab coat.

It had to hurt quite a bit, but the young man did not even frown
.

He peered down from the edge of the cliff.

"I can't even see the professor anymore."

"Wh-what are you muttering about!? We need to get out of here ! It's dangerous!"

Walter nodded at the medical officer's words.

"I see. I have to agree with you there."

He sighed as he stood on the very, very edge.

"C'mon, professor. Rushing ahead is only going to hurt you."

"What are you talking about!? This is an enemy attack! Hurry up and evacuate inside!"

Walter turned toward the desperate voice with a small smile.

"You're right. I should leave here and go somewhere safer."

With that, he jumped out into the windy sky.

Part 3

At 3:08 PM, the Bladlikburg Eins's bridge was in a state of complete disarray.

"Levels 1, 2, and 4 were completely destroyed on the starboard side! Level 3 was damaged on the rear starboard side! Levels 5 and

6 were partially damaged on the mid starboard side! Our fighters can no longer connect to the starboard side!!"

"The Eins's Eisen Soldat #1-4 will be unable land for the aforementioned reason. Have them land at Berlin Airport or Tempelhof Airport instead. Send out course instructions to ensure they do not collide with passenger planes."

"We are scattering fragments of the armor. All fighters in flight should avoid travelling below or behind the Eins."

"Our center of gravity is shifting to port! Everyone who is free, move starboard! Starboard!"

"Lock down the starboard water storage tanks and ensure all water that will flow from the outer hull will do so. Focus on the ship's center of gravity."

Amid the busy exchange of words and documents, Oscar sat in his command chair by the window and felt nearly worked to death by his instructions to the different ships.

He suddenly looked out the window.

Quite a bit of water and oil had spilled from above and stained the window. The water froze white on the glass and crystallized.

…They really got us here.

The components of the outer hull rained down from them.

He was suddenly worried about the city of Berlin below. Even a single screw would become a deadly weapon when falling from this height.

He looked down. The bridge's window continued down to the floor, so his raised command seat gave him an excellent view of the area below them.

He saw the clouds, but Berlin was visible through the gaps.

…I'm sorry.

After that thought, he looked back up.

He could see the blue sky through the slightly dirtied window.

Something even bluer fell outside the window.

"Mh?"

He recognized the shape and color from somewhere. It was a round shape with some flesh-color stuck to it.

It was a person.

And given the color of the clothing…

"Wagner!"

He reflexively stood from his chair.

Suddenly, something else fell and he saw it clearly this time.

The man wore a lab coat.

"Walter!"

The young man fell straight down and their gazes almost seemed to audibly meet through the glass.

If anything could be called a coincidence, this was it. Neither of them had meant for it to happen, so it was a truly unexpected instant.

The strength in the young man's eyes filled Oscar's head with pain.

He ran from his chair, down the stairs, and to the window. He did not even hear the surrounding commotion. All he heard was the distant rumbling.

And that rumbling was approaching from above.

He knew what was coming after those two had fallen.

"The dp-XXX."

That was exactly what descended before his eyes.

Its shadow raced through the bridge for just an instant. The collection of metal organs appeared outside the window and shot downwards.

It was fast.

In a heartbeat, the glass shook so hard it threatened to break. This was a shockwave. The air beyond the window had been torn apart by the passing battleship and thin clouds formed as it cooled.

The commotion inside the bridge was drowned out by the roar.

Oscar felt the sound in his head, gut, and limbs, but he could not tear his eyes away from the window.

The metal ship dropped toward the hazy city of Berlin. The ship remained horizontal, so it was a somewhat odd descent. A lab coat and blue work outfit were visible beyond it.

The three falling objects grew smaller and smaller.

However, the battleship was catching up.

"…"

Oscar silently stared down at them.

The sword-like ship reached the lab coat.

A moment later, it reached the blue work outfit.

The dp-XXX then fluttered like a leaf. It stopped falling and slipped forward.

It looked small at such a distance, but it glowed a brilliant gold as it reflected the sunlight.

"So they did it."

Those words that not even he understood brought Oscar back to his senses. The commotion around him once more reached him.

He suddenly realized he was clenching both fists so tightly it hurt.

"The battle begins here!"

Part 4

At 3:12 PM, the Kaiserburg glided approximately four hundred meters above Berlin.

The cockpit door was open.

"Welcome back," said Else as she stood from the pilot's seat.

When she turned around, she just about cried out.

Paul was supporting Walter who was covered in blood.

"A-are you okay?"

Walter smiled.

"Let's just say I'm almost okay."

He spoke in a jocular tone, but he did not actually say he was okay. It must have been a serious injury.

"What happened? Was it my bombardment?"

"Don't worry. His wound just reopened from the difference in air pressure and the pressure of the wind as he fell. It wasn't your fault."

"Either way, this was our only choice. …More importantly, Else , thanks."

"I didn't do all that much… And this isn't the time! We need to treat your wound!"

"This is the battlefield," said the young man as he wiped splattered blood from his cheek.

She sighed, approached him, and checked his right arm.

It was still bleeding, but it looked like it would stop before long. She was more worried by how limply the arm was hanging at his side.

"Walter, don't tell me…"

"Yeah, it's broken. The bullet got me pretty good."

Else had a thought while looking up at him.

…Does he not feel any pain?

She mentally shook her head to reject that thought.

It had to hurt. He was just not letting anyone else know about it.

…Why?

She had a hunch. Someone pursuing his dream could not show any weakness. Even if he wanted help, he would not let anyone reach out to him.

With that in mind, she said one thing.

"I'll tie off the wound real quick."

He looked troubled by that.

"But the enemy fighters should be approaching already."

She slapped the face that said that.

It made a surprisingly satisfying sound.

Paul gave a joking whistle while supporting Walter.

She looked straight up at Walter.

"This ship is filled with delicate machinery, so I don't want to get blood all over it."

She gave a blatant lie and reached for the right sleeve of his lab coat and work outfit.

Once she touched them, she realized the inside of the work outfit's sleeve had become a wet rag.

Ignoring how much she was dirtying her hand, she started by rolling the lab coat up to his upper arm.

"Mister, get to the pilot's seat. Enemy fighters might be coming."

"Sure, sure."

Paul sounded oddly happy about that and he patted Walter's shoulder before moving to the pilot's seat. Walter smiled bitterly at the touch on the shoulder.

Else thought for just a moment and rolled up the work outfit sleeve as well. His arm was exposed and she could see the red oil-like blood covering it.

She saw the wound, rolled the sleeve up further, and stopped at the elbow.

"Is that too tight?"

"You're trying to stop the blood, so it's perfect."

…*Good.*

She pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the blood from his arm.

"I wish I had a splint. …Should I make a sling?"

"I can rest the arm on the armrest, so don't bother."

It still had to hurt quite a bit and Else carefully tied the handkerchief around the wound.

"That should do it."

She stepped away from him and finally looked at his face.

He scratched his head with his other hand.

"Else."

"What?"

"I'd only ever been slapped by a woman once and I was kind of proud of that fact."

"Who was the first? If you say your mother, you're about to get a third."

He thought for a moment before answering.

"Try not to make it hurt too much, okay?"

She slapped his opposite cheek before he had even finished speaking. This one sounded nice too.

"Enough nonsense. Just get to your post. Honestly."

She looked at his face and saw blood on the handprint from her slap.

…*Ah.*

She realized her hand was covered in blood. It was drying and her fingerprints stood out.

She sighed.

"Do you have anything to wipe the blood up with?"

"I always wipe my hands on the bottom of my lab coat."

"Please don't say that so seriously."

She had no choice but to grab the bag she had left in Walter's seat. She pulled a towel out and belatedly realized she could have used it on Walter's arm.

"Stick your face this way."

"…Are you going to slap me again?"

"What has you so scared? Now stick your face over here or I really will."

He crouched down and leaned forward as she had asked.

"Good boy."

She spoke as if to a pet and wiped the blood from his cheek.

"There. That should do it."

"Am I back to my handsome self?"

"You? Handsome?"

"…I'm never asking you anything again."

He frowned, passed by her, and sat in the gunner seat.

He used his left hand to place his right arm on the armrest, opened his right hand, and grabbed the sphere for the field emitter .

Then he turned back toward her.

"This seat is shaped a little different from before."

"I increased its range of transformation so I could sit in it. I also modified the voice recognition system a bit."

She pulled the communicator from her pocket and handed it to him.

He extended his left hand and took it.

"How much can we use it now?"

"It should be a bit smarter than before."

"I see."

He faced forward and gave a single command.

"Sit."

The Kaiserburg did not respond.

"This thing isn't smarter at all, Else."

"Are you sure it doesn't try to match the intelligence of its user?"

"Hm, you may be right. So when I use it, it'll only accept a complicated, intellectual, and highly refined command."

"Are you sure you didn't take a bullet to the head too?"

"How rude. I've always been like this."

"Hey, you two. This is no time for saying stupid things."

"I was not saying stupid things."

"Neither was I."

"Shut up!" shouted Paul as he slammed a fist down on his armrest. "Try to be a little quieter. The enemy's here and they're trying to charge in at us all at once."

Sure enough, several contrails raced across the sky toward them . Else frantically sat in the seat with the navigation equipment.

The enemy fighters appeared as dots of light on the radar.

"Wow… There's a whole army of them!"

"Don't say there's an army! Give us some numbers! Can you not count above three!?"

"That's right, Else. Instead of calling this an army, call it a spectacular catch."

"Shut up, both of you. None of them stand a chance, so what does it matter? We only have to worry about that black one, right?"

Was that fighter coming? Was Mayer coming?

…If he is, we can have our battle.

With that thought, she fastened her seatbelt.

The battle was truly beginning.

Part 5

At 3:21 PM, the number of destroyed fighters had reached the double digits and Oscar gave new orders.

"Once the Eins's center of gravity has recovered, send out the Flammen Ritter. Until then, have all fighters cruise above Berlin, pursue the Kaiserburg, and keep the pressure on it. But do not actually attack. Once the Flammen Ritter has launched, all fighters are to return to their ships."

Part 6

At 3:23 PM, the Flammen Ritter was still attached to the eighth connector on the Eins's port side.

Mayer stared into the sky from the cockpit.

"Can't they hurry up?"

The sun would set before long and the moon's effects would come into play. If he did not settle this before the moon came out, the Kaiserburg would almost certainly fly into space.

"I can't believe this."

When the Eisen Soldat had been launched, he had still been on the bridge with Oscar, so the damage to the Eins had delayed him.

…I was careless.

The commotion below seemed to have settled for the time being .

Oscar had decided only this fighter could fight on even footing.

It would come down to a one-on-one fight.

…He has high expectations of me.

That made him happy and he smiled bitterly when he realized how childish that was.

He was enjoying this entire situation. That meant he had hoped for something like this. At the very least, he had not been forced into it and he had not been reluctantly dragged into it.

He had wanted it himself.

…Yes.

"That's right."

…There's something I need to do.

He closed his eyes.

He had no goal. He could not truly say how much he could do. However, he was glad he could not say that.

If he won here, he would aim even higher. If he lost, he would overcome that regret and still aim higher. He was prepared to keep doing that until the day he died.

…How far can I go?

He opened his eyes and saw the blue sky beyond the canopy.

He suddenly reached out a hand and grabbed at the empty space with his glove-covered fingers.

…I want to advance farther than anyone someday.

As soon as he thought that, he received a transmission from the Bladlikburg.

"Second Lieutenant Mayer, the Eins will have finished its preparations in about a minute."

"Understood. I'm ready when you are."

"Commander Oscar has a message. Do you want to hear it?"

"I do."

The other man hesitated for just a moment, cleared his throat, and continued.

"Believe in yourself."

"!"

"That is all. Please wait just a little longer."

Mayer was so busy thinking about his commander that he completely forgot to respond.

…*He saw right through me.*

Part 7

At 3:35 PM, Else saw a single unique dot appear on the radar. It approached much faster than the previous ones.

Something resembling joy overpowered any fear of the unknown.

"Here it is! That black fighter craft is approaching from the east-northeast on our right!"

"Else, could you call it something other than 'that black fighter craft'? That's a pretty long name."

"That's right. And mention the direction first."

"Shut up. Try to imagine what it's like from my perspective."

"And you try to imagine what it's like from ours."

"Hey, you two," cut in Walter. "I see it. That's it, isn't it?"

Else looked up and did indeed see a single contrail approaching from the right at tremendous speed.

The enemy fighter showed up on the radar and the other dots began to move.

"Huh? The small fries are running away."

"The sun's about to set, so they must want to avoid losing control. Also…"

"Also?"

"Those Soldat can't keep up with this battle."

Walter's voice was filled with blatant joy and Paul sighed next to him.

"We've got no choice. Let's fly down into the city. We still don't know how that weapon works."

"If you mean the Lanze, I have it."

She had kept the bullet in her pocket in case it could be some help. It was something like a good luck charm.

Walter glanced her way.

"Let me see it later."

"Sure."

Even as she spoke, her vision grew lower and building roofs grew up from below.

The Kaiserburg had dived to fly through Berlin at extreme low altitude.

The scenery rushed backwards at blinding speed.

"W-wait! We're gonna hit that! Wah!"

A large white and rectangular building grew in front of her. She recognized it from somewhere, but she did not have time to dig through her memories.

The white wall filled her vision.

…Oh, no!

An instant later, the Kaiserburg turned left at a right angle. It appeared to slide sideways as it flew just above the cars on the road.

It was fast.

…We avoided it?

They had to have been moving three or four hundred kilometers an hour, so that had taken incredible piloting skill.

Lines of apartments, stores, and other buildings flew by from left to right too quickly to see anything but their color. There was no time to watch them pass.

"Look out!"

"Don't worry. We avoided the Zeughaus back there. Right, professor?"

"Sorry, but I'm gonna hit this one."

"Eh?"

Immediately afterwards, an impact reached them from the left and the view out the window briefly grew white. Something like dust filled the air outside. It was smoke. They had crashed into some kind of building.

"Wah!"

Else's seatbelt dug painfully into her shoulder and she squeezed the armrests with all her might. A dull vibration ran from her butt and up her back. It refused to go away, so it had to have been a large building.

Instead of a rumbling, the ship was surrounded by repeating sounds of splitting stone. What were obviously pieces of stone pillars flew by and almost struck the window.

"Wah, wah, wah, wah! You've gone too far now!"

"It's not my fault – whoa, that was close! This was an accident!"

"Hmm. This is a lot of fun."

After one final tremor, they broke through a giant wall.

The Kaiserburg continued moving and pierced straight through the entire structure.

The view outside the window quickly cleared and the city streets were visible once more. Their speed had only dropped a little and the people in the building probably had no idea what had hit it.

"Don't get carried away!"

Else looked at the electric display showing the ship's damage. Its overall surface temperature had risen because the external paneling's emblems had activated to neutralize the impacts.

…This thing's sturdy.

But her admiration was immediately followed by a realization.

The building they had avoided had been the Zeughaus and they had moved left before hitting this building. That meant…

"Wait! We just hit the University of Berlin, didn't we!?"

"Yeah, it really pains me to damage my alma mater."

"You didn't just damage it! You downright destroyed it! And I' m still enrolled there!"

"Shut up. It's a national school, so it was built with my taxes. I can destroy it a bit if I want."

"What do you mean *your* taxes!? You just destroyed a hundred times more than you paid!"

"Yeah, he's got a long way to go. I would've destroyed 1500 times what I paid."

"You be quiet!"

She looked down and found the dot for the fighter was almost right in front of them, but all the city apartments around kept them from seeing it out their window.

"What can we do in this city!?"

"The city actually works in our favor."

"Eh?"

"That's right. From what we've seen, that fighter is meant for close-range combat or mid-range when it uses that weird lance. All these obstacles will keep it from making quick attacks and flying off."

"In its current form, the Kaiserburg can fire four homing or guided shots at once. The obstacles don't matter to us.

Walter turned back with a smile.

"Although I'm sure he's thinking pretty much the same thing."

The enemy fighter was nearly right in front of them.

Part 8

It was 3:38 PM.

A minute and a half had passed since the encounter had begun and the Flammen Ritter was on its enemy's tail. It pursued its opponent while flying through the streets with precise movements one would never expect of an aircraft.

The Kaiserburg tried to lose it by taking a southern right turn from the six-lane Unter den Linden and onto the four-lane Friedrichstraße.

The Flammen Ritter tilted vertically and fired its vertical ascension rocket against its own inertia. The fighter's rear rockets remained on full blast the entire time. The intersection took a shallow angle, but it made the turn.

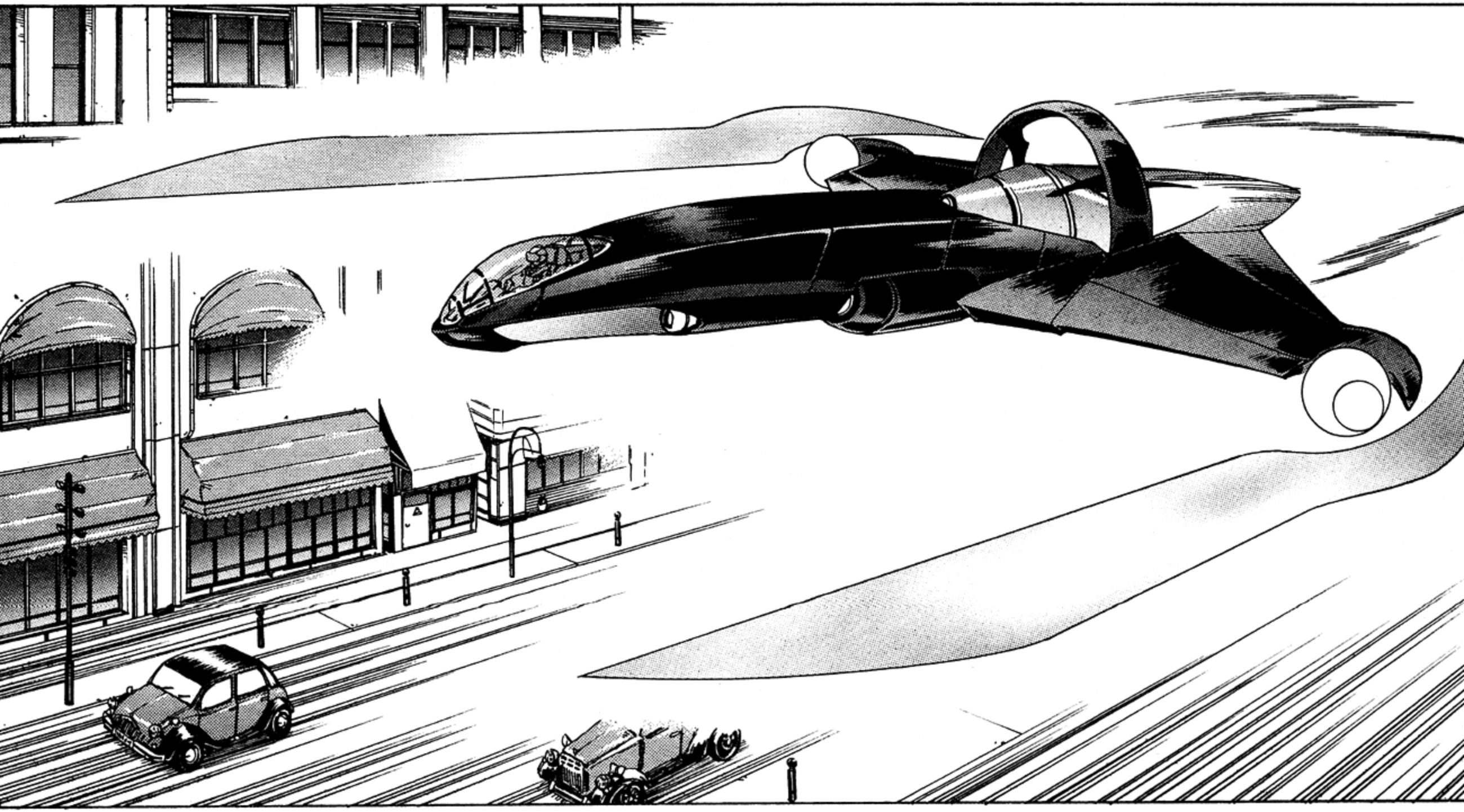
The Flammen Ritter also flew down Friedrichstraße.

A train station flashed by to the right, but it vanished behind too quickly to read the name.

Continuing straight would bring them to Möhringstraße, but a straight path was dangerous for someone on the run.

The black fighter fired two red and burning Kugel. They were straight shots.

The Kaiserburg neutralized them with guided shots of its own.



One pair exploded and the other burst into flames as their remains scattered like flowers.

The Flammen Ritter used that moment to fire a Lanze. The bluish-white spear of light tore through the explosive flames of the Kugel and flew straight for its target.

This lance was faster and more powerful than an arrow.

However, the large aerial ship avoided it. As if to say no simple projectile could defeat it, it elegantly slipped to the side, hopped up in the air, and slide-flipped over the building to its left. It was a calm action and it felt like the ship had eyes on the back.

The black fighter pulled up without bothering to watch the Lanze stab into the ground further down the road. It used every last one of its rockets to twist through the air and shift leftward.

It flew over the buildings.

The German Cathedral was visible up ahead. Beyond that were the temple-like Schauspielhaus and the French Cathedral. The Gendarmenmarkt in front of the three buildings was full of *Weihnachts* stands and gathered people.

The people in the square looked up at the Flammen Ritter in the sky that would soon grow red. They must have seen the ongoing dogfight because some of them were attempting to flee the square.

The Kaiserburg was not in that square.

Instead, the large warship was beyond the German Cathedral's dome.

The Flammen Ritter almost seemed to glide as it traveled above the square.

As soon as the black fighter approached the German Cathedral's dome, something happened. The Kaiserburg suddenly melted into the air and vanished.

This was the Phantom illusion technique.

The Flammen Ritter quickly altered its course. As if forcing itself to dance, it twisted its forward momentum and redirected itself backwards.

Having turned around, it saw its enemy.

The Kaiserburg was tilted and clinging to the wall of the building in front of the cathedral square.

The Flammen Ritter eliminated its momentum, started forward, and tried to charge at the ship, but the Kaiserburg fired four bullets of light. They surrounded the fighter before it could pick up speed and drew a Circle Emblem in the space around it.

This was the Finster Kunst.

Given the distance and the Flammen Ritter's speed, this attack was impossible to avoid.

Part 9

At 3:40 PM, Mayer built up his resolve in the Flammen Ritter's cockpit.

At this rate, the gravity barrier would hit him and there was only one way to break through.

It would put a heavy burden on him, but he had no choice.

He resisted the urge to vomit. His previous piloting had been reckless enough, so his shoulders ached as they threatened to dislocate and his blood was gathered in his back.

But if he did not force himself even further, he could not continue on.

"I don't mind!"

His shout did not actually leave his mouth.

His fingers simply moved across the cockpit's field emitter controllers.

At the same time, the Circle Emblem surrounding him vanished and became a mass of gravity.

Part 10

Meanwhile, the three in the vertically-oriented Kaiserburg looked up at the scene.

"Did we get him!?" shouted Paul.

He saw a legendary spell activating before his eyes. The black Finster Kunst swallowed up all light. At full power, it covered a radius of about one hundred meters.

They had aimed a bit high so it would not reach the people in the square, but the enemy fighter craft had still been completely enveloped by the vortex of destruction.

It sounded like a giant had punched the earth.

The German Cathedral's dome was instantly blown away and torn apart.

But it only lasted an instant.

The spherical black barrier burst from within.

The shattering of gravity sounded surprisingly like shattering glass.

A spear of flames flew from within. The Flammen Lanze had almost entirely solidified and its strong directionality had broken through the wall of gravity.

The three in the Kaiserburg knew what that giant spear was.

"A Panzer Emblem!"

Paul frantically had the ship ascend, but his disbelief slowed his reaction time.

In an instant, they felt an impact much like being kicked from behind. The spear had caught the ship somewhere. As the ship ascended, its tail end rose up as if to move forward and the entire ship rotated in three dimensions.

"Kyah!"

The western sunset was visible out the window where the city had been. After a few clouds rotated into view, the city returned from above. They saw the spear of flames instantly burn away the building the Kaiserburg had been hiding behind.

"Else! Where were we hit!?"

"Um…w-w-w-w-w-wait! Hold us steady!"

"Shut up. I'm trying."

The ship twisted around as if tossing or turning in its sleep and it began to fly upside down. The scenery outside appeared upside down to them.

Else held her skirt down and checked the electric display in front of her.

"The two upper field emitters and the rear skirt have changed color!"

"Crap. So the weapons and directional wings were damaged. What color are they?"

"They're both yellow."

"Keh. They'll be back to normal in fifteen minutes."

"Professor, is the Kaiserburg still not growing?"

"It probably needs just a little more. To be honest, that attack got us pretty good."

"It's too early to celebrate. We have to win this battle first."

"Not a chance. The field emitters are one thing, but what can we do without the skirt?"

"We can't fly straight, so we can't use our full speed for the next fifteen minutes."

"Can we escape?" asked Else.

Still upside-down, Walter turned toward her while smiling and holding his right arm in his left hand.

"We can't. And so we'll fight."

"How?"

He gave her an awfully good-natured smile before answering.

"We'll do something unexpected."

"Eh?"

"Professor, move us behind some convenient cover. We'll search for a place to turn this all around."

"Sure thing."

After Paul's response, the ship flipped right-side up.

The items that had fallen to the ceiling fell back to the floor and Else's bag fell behind Walter.

Part 11

At 3:43 PM, Mayer clicked his tongue inside the Flammen Ritter .

"Did I go too far?"

He could only see fire beyond the canopy.

The separate building that the German Cathedral used for storage was burning despite being made of stone. That was thanks to a strike from the Panzer Emblem.

He felt a twinge of regret, but he settled that by telling himself it was unlikely anyone had been inside the building. He then moved the control column.

The stone walls and roof began to crumble as they burned in the flames. The Flammen Ritter activated its vertical ascent rocket and

almost seemed to plunge its head into sand. The effects of the ether were turning the stone ceiling to ash and the fighter craft flew into it.

Mayer breathed in, but he was still not feeling well. The pain in his chest likely came from a broken rib, so he simply had to put up with it.

He toyed with the field emitter's firing button located on the back of the control column.

Two lights appeared in the flames outside the canopy. They were Schwert.

He swung up the swords and tore through the roof.

He stepped on the pedal below his foot and the fighter almost seemed to jump up.

The floating fighter blew away the burning stones and instantly entered the cold winter air.

It rotated so the building's roof and Friedrichstraße were below and the Gendarmenmarkt was visible ahead. The now dome-less German Cathedral, the Schauspielhaus, and the French Cathedral were visible as well.

However, the many people who had been enjoying *Weihnachts* in the large square were nowhere to be seen.

They had all run away.

"…"

Mayer was briefly dumbfounded, but strength reentered his gaze and he looked around again.

He spotted the enemy. A ship reflected the reddening light of the sky. It was moving east toward the city hall past the green area along the Spree.

…Are they trying to run?

But he shook his head.

His opponents here were not the type to do that. They had a plan and they were moving to a new battlefield.

In that case, he had no choice but to pursue and continue fighting.

Mayer moved the Flammen Ritter forward.

His opponents were right in front of him.

Part 12

At 3:45 PM, the clock tower of Berlin's city hall was visible outside the Kaiserburg's window.

For better or for worse, the red brick building stood out for a number of reasons. From their current viewpoint, the difference from the surrounding buildings was immediately obvious.

Else looked out at the red tower.

"That clock tower sure is tall."

"Let's use it."

"Use it how?"

"To finish this."

After Walter's response, the communicator in front of Paul emitted the tone of an incoming transmission. At the same time, Mayer's voice filled the cockpit.

"Walter, can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can."

"I want to settle this soon. How does that sound?"

"Do you think you could wait until our ship heals its wounds?"

"I already waited once."

Else nodded at that. This young man had indeed been waiting for this moment.

"I will now shoot down your ship," said Mayer. "Okay?"

"Hmm. No, that doesn't sound very okay."

"Try to take this seriously," cut in Else.

"I don't mind," replied Mayer. "I will not hold back and I think you know what will happen if you do."

"Oh, we won't hold back."

Walter's voice rang throughout the cockpit and Else saw his right hand grab the sphere on the armrest again. The only functioning field emitters were the two on the bottom of the ship, but with only two, he could control them without moving his hands between controls.

"Let me be honest," he said to his opponent. "Mayer. Right now , I see you as an incredibly familiar enemy."

And…

"I defeat my enemies."

Else gulped and faced forward.

Walter did not turn around in the copilot seat, but she saw his right hand tense up on the armrest.

…*He's serious.*

She could not see his face, but she felt like she knew the look on it.

It somehow scared her. At the very least, she would have been completely speechless were she in Mayer's position. That was how much intensity filled the young man.

What was his opponent thinking?

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Walter."

"Glad?"

"So glad it terrifies me."

"You're scared?"

"So much I can't stop trembling."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. I'm serious about this, after all."

"So am I."

Mayer and Walter's exchange sent Else's pulse racing.

…*This is it.*

The tension somehow resembled joy. Her heart pounded in her chest as she sensed some sign of what was to come.

They would compete and it would lead to some definite result.

What would that result be?

She did not know and she could not tell, but that unseen answer would settle everything.

In short, it came down to whether they could reach space, but it was not that simple an issue. Many other problems had been drawn into this battle.

She suddenly realized she had crossed her arms as if embracing her chest. Something threatened to escape from there.

The young man named Mayer was trying to fight. Paul and Walter were as well.

…What about me?

Her seat gave her no device for directly controlling a weapon. Even the communicator was under Walter's control. She had no way to fight.

…Am I just going to watch?

She did not like the sound of that. After all, she was the same sort of person as them.

Before she realized it, a word had left her mouth.

"Walter."

The young man did not turn around. He did not seem to care that she had called his name.

She spoke as if begging him.

"I don't want to be left out."

"I know that," he snapped back.

Her slight surprise left her speechless, so he ignored her and continued.

"Mayer, to make up for our damage, we're going to have Else here fight alongside us. Is that okay?"

"Absolutely. I had already made a promise to that end."

"Then our victory is pretty much guaranteed."

With that announcement, Walter ended the transmission.

The battle was about to resume.

It would likely be settled in an instant.

Part 13

At 3:47 PM, Mayer saw the Kaiserburg slide to the side.

It moved left.

He sent the Flammen Ritter in the same direction and the clock tower of Berlin's city hall finally came into view.

The Kaiserburg moved behind it and did not come out on the other side. The dot on the radar at the front of the cockpit indicated the ship was hiding behind the clock tower.

It was luring him in.

Which side would it attack from?

It would likely fire a guided Kugel first, but they could not see him either. They would be using their radar to blindly guide it based on the distance between them.

He guessed they intended to target him once he frantically avoided the Kugel. Dodging it would mean his loss, so he had to cut it from the air.

…Can I do it?

The Flammen Ritter was less than thirty meters from the clock tower and cutting down a Kugel at that range would not be easy.

…But I have to.

He would cut down the Kugel and continue on for a close-range dogfight with the Kaiserburg. This opponent had no close-range ability, so he would win. Or at least take it down with him.

He produced Schwert on the right and left.

He regulated his breathing. It did not matter if his ribs hurt because the pain would numb his tension. The nauseous feeling from before had passed. His focus grew sharper and he entered top form for this sort of battle.

"Good," he muttered.

At that very moment, the Kugel flew out.

But there were two: one from the right and one from the left. The left one was white and the right black, so they were an Eisen Kugel and a normal Kugel respectively. However, he did not have time or a need to check on that. They were both dangerous.

He swung up the Schwert and had a feeling it would work.

That was when something changed.

The two Kugel made sharp turns right in front of the Flammen Ritter.

"What!?"

Before he could finish his question, the white Kugel struck the red brick clock tower. With a quick hardening sound, the clock tower turned pure white.

The brick had been transformed into ice.

The black Kugel struck its base.

It only took a moment for the tower of ice to collapse.

It sounded like a waterfall.

The massive tower of ice scattered smoke made up of what looked like silver sand and it collapsed toward the Flammen Ritter. It was like a wall. No wall could have worked better.

But the Flammen Ritter could not move. Mayer could not move. The great noise and pressure filled him with panic and a single thought dominated his mind.

Right or left? Which direction would the Kaiserburg come from ?

The enemy was trying to drive out the Flammen Ritter using the falling tower and he could not give them what they wanted.

…Which is it?

The angle of the tower's collapse grew, but Mayer continued to think.

He had to choose one or the other. If he did not move, he would be crushed by the ice. He could destroy it with his Panzer Emblem, but he would be wide open afterwards.

…Do I have to make a gamble?

But then he realized something.

An all or nothing gamble was not a true competition. Being suicidal and being willing to risk your life were not the same thing.

He could not allow himself to think that way.

Then what do I do?

"…!"

An idea came to him. This idea was almost guaranteed to take him to Walter.

He threw out all of his previous predictions. He could not use conventional thinking when fighting that ship.

He had been asking "left or right", but the answer was obvious.

"Straight down the center!"

He shouted out and fired a Lanze. The lance of light stabbed into the center of the ice tower. He raised his fighter's power as far as it would go and shot forward. He flew straight toward the spot the Lanze had hit.

…Go!

He swung up his two Schwert. For an instant, he saw a second Kugel fly by on either side.

…I was right.

…They tried to panic me, but I was slower to respond than they expected.

…That's why they fired again just to be sure.

The dp-XXX had not moved. He was certain of it now. They intended to shoot him head on while he avoided the ice tower and expected an attack from the left and right.

…But I didn't fall for it!

He felt insulted and the feeling grew into a blazing anger inside him. He flew toward a white wall with a Lanze sticking into it.

He slammed his Schwert into the area weakened by the Lanze and the belly of the ice tower tore open. At the same time, he sent the Flammen Ritter flying into it.

He tore through.

Everything around him was pale blue and white.

A powerful shock ran through the fighter. The tower may have been collapsing, but it had great mass. This was much like accelerating and flying into a sand dune.

Metal across the black fighter cried out in protest, but he did not care.

He raised the fighter's power even further and swung the Schwert. The swords of light sliced through the ice and the tips of the swords seemed to reach the other side. Trusting this was the end, he jabbed the two Schwert forward.

He felt them plunge deep into something heavy, but the tips felt light. They had reached the open air.

"Gooooo!"

With a roar, he accelerated even more and the space before him opened up. He almost gasped at the expanse of open air before him.

Just as he had expected, the dp-XXX was there. It was exactly where his radar said it would be.

"You're mine!"

Even with a guided shot, the field emitter had to change direction before firing a Kugel.

The dp-XXX had only just fired Kugel to the left and right, so it had not had time to turn the field emitters forward.

This was why taking the initiative led to victory.

He charged forward with the Schwert still held straight out. He could destroy a Kugel even if one was fired.

As he drew closer, Mayer faced straight forward and knew he had won.

At the same time, he noticed something odd.

For some reason, someone stood on top of the dp-XXX.

He recognized the person. It was the young woman named Else he had met at the Breuer house. She was the one Walter had said would be fighting alongside him.

She was the one he had promised a confrontation with.

She wielded a submachine gun atop the dp-XXX.

…?

In that spilt second, doubt filled Mayer.

A bullet fired by such a tiny machinegun could never sink the Flammen Ritter. Nevertheless, she pressed it against her shoulder and aimed his way.

…*What is going on?*

He then remembered what Walter had said over the radio.

"Then our victory is pretty much guaranteed."

What had he meant?

Thoughts raced through Mayer's head until he felt dizzy, but he made a single prediction.

"It can't be!"

In that instant, he thought he heard a sound: a gunshot.

It was the light, fleeting, and yet lingering sound of a submachine gun firing just once.

That shot settled everything.

Part 14

At 3:48 PM, Else pulled the trigger. She felt the recoil in her arm and pain in her shoulder.

She saw the bullet transform into a Lanze as it flew.

That Flammen Lanze continued straight on and into the approaching black fighter craft.

The Schwert the fighter held forward shattered when the lance reached them and that impact moved the lance slightly off target.

The shot had been mercilessly aimed at the nose, but it instead struck the right shoulder of the black fighter and split it in two.

The two pieces of the enemy fighter roared as they flew below Else's feet and below the Kaiserburg. It had been shot down.

Else slowly lowered her submachine gun.

A single shot had ended it all.

Instead of a bullet, she had used the Lanze she had carried in her pocket as a good luck charm. A round of ammunition could be divided between the cartridge and the actual bullet, so swapping it out had been easy.

Walter had said they could win in a close-range fight, Else had suggested using the Lanze, and Paul had done the prep work.

She was the only one who could have fired it.

"I did it."

Her legs were shaking and she did not have it in her to see what had become of the enemy fighter she had shot down. She simply collapsed into a sitting position.

As the trembling in her legs spread to the rest of her body, she returned to the Kaiserburg's cockpit.

Once she was back, the entire ship was creaking as if groaning.

It was making the final preparations for its ascent into space.

Part 15

It was 3:50 PM.

"Here it comes, professor! The transformation has begun! The field emitters and stabilizing wing have recovered and all the weapons and propulsion devices have fully expanded!"

Part 16

At 3:51 PM, the Kaiserburg began its transformation into its third form. It completely remade its damaged and worn-down body. It strengthened itself so it could fight at close range, so it would have more stability, and so it would never be damaged again.

The nose extended sharply forward. The rear skirt-shaped semicircular wing stretched even wider and covered the bottom as well. It now looked like a tube. The horn-shaped angular wings on either side stretched up and hid the top of the ship.

The sword-like ship had dressed itself in a feminine form and this transformation stretched it out in a straight line. Some traces of the original form remained, but it had grown to be something else entirely.

It could fly to space like this.

Even as the Kaiserburg continued to grow here and there, it faced upwards.

The Bladlikburg floated there.

It almost seemed to hesitate for a moment, but then the Kaiserburg began to soar.

Part 17

At 3:52 PM, the Bladlikburg Eins's bridge had grown perfectly silent. Everyone's eyes were glued to the window.

A certain man stood there: Oscar. He was staring down toward Berlin.

No one said anything. They were all waiting for his instructions as their commander.

He had two options here: continue to fight or admit defeat.

…*We should fight.*

He knew it was hopeless, but they still had to fight. Otherwise, the military would have no reason to exist.

The dp-XXX flew up from below. It was wrapped in ether in preparation to use its Panzer Emblem. Its new form's Panzer Emblem could undoubtedly destroy the Bladlikburg fleet in a single strike.

…*What do I do?*

He thought. He could not stop the dp-XXX here. Death would visit them in an instant and the world would change.

In the end, he and the military had been unable to do anything.

…*Is it hopeless?*

It was too soon for the arrival of the next age. He knew that for certain, but there was no longer any way to stop this flow of events .

…What can I do?

Perhaps standing in the Kaiserburg's path and dying would be pointless, but it would have honor. At the very least, the world would later know he tried to stop the age from changing too soon.

But he knew that would not accomplish anything in reality. The world would change regardless. What good was some consolation after the fact?

…What am I supposed to do?

He slowly, slowly raised a hand. That was the sign he was about to give an order.

His eyes were turned toward the dp-XXX. The ether surrounding the ship was taking form. It was a giant god. The giant god had wings, glowed white, and wielded a great hammer.

That strike would crush them.

Oscar felt the rumbling in his gut, but it did not reach his head.

He watched that god created by human hands. He stared at this opponent who he could never understand.

…The new era probably arrived from the moment that ship was made.

That thought briefly flashed through his mind.

…Then were all our efforts here meaningless?

That thought startled him.

If that were true, what had they been doing? What had been accomplished by all the fighting, the lives lost, and the people left behind?

Why did the military exist?

Fighting to the end and dying may have been honorable, but wouldn't dying here mean not approving of any part of this new age?

That would mean having their position rejected in the future.

With that thought, he suddenly felt at ease.

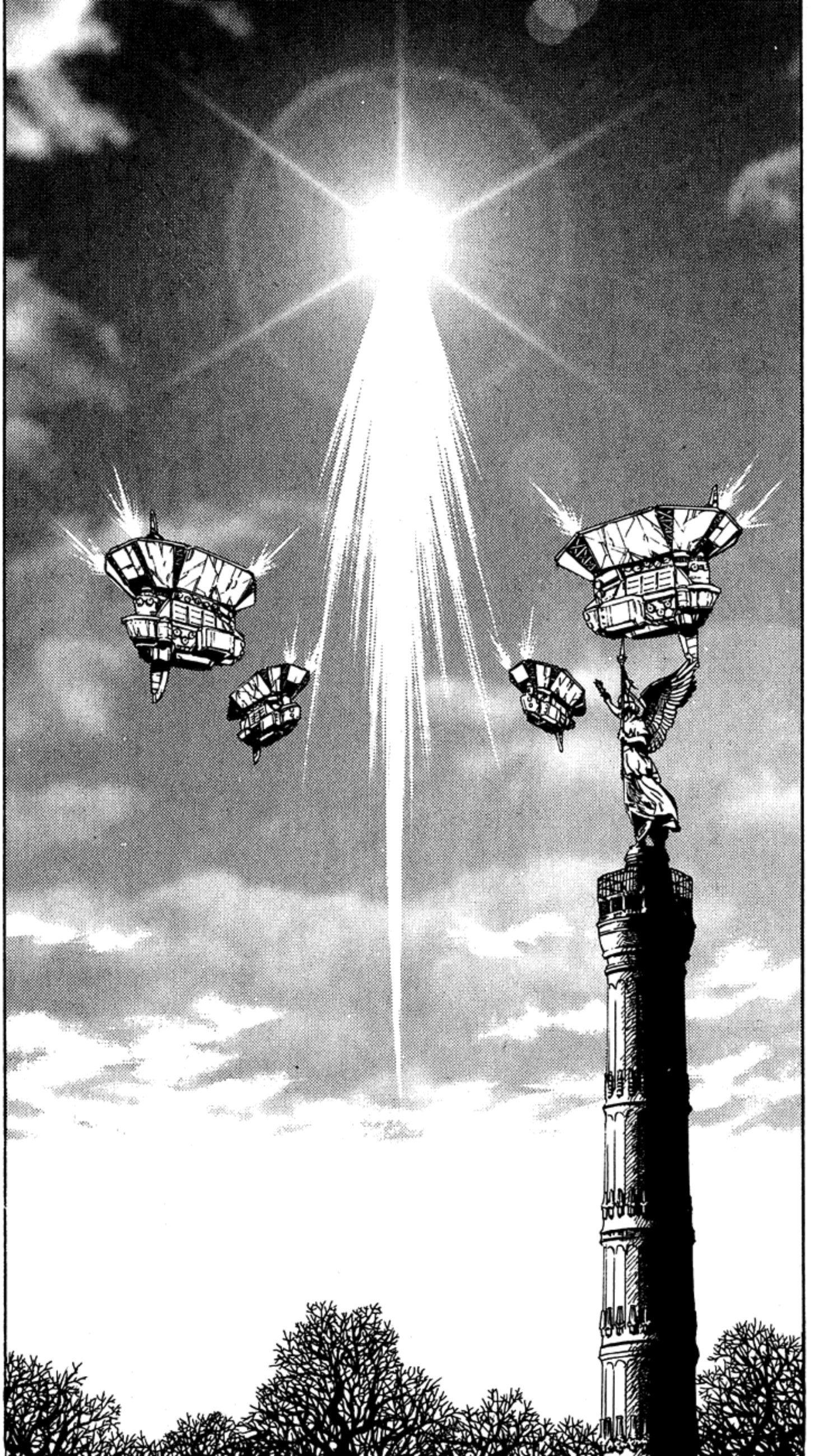
"I see," he muttered.

He gathered strength in his raised hand and gave his order.

Part 18

It was 3:53 PM.

The Flammen Ritter lay in two pieces in the middle of the Gertraudenstraße in front of the tower-less city hall. Even as the blocked traffic piled up, Mayer made no attempt to move from the cockpit.



He simply looked up into the sky. The red of sunset was growing purple and vanishing. A deep blue darkness colored the sky as the stars and moon came out.

It looked like a scene from mythology.

Four Bladlikburgs took position in the four cardinal directions to create a path down the center and a god passed through that ring.

The god flew up into the blue sky and suddenly vanished.

For a while, a single trail of smoke could be seen rising into the heavens. A white blade thrust upwards as if slicing the nearly dark sky in two.

…It's as beautiful as a miracle.

"Well, it is *Weihnachts*. I guess I shouldn't be surprised to see a miracle."

Oscar had to be looking up into the same sky from the Bladlikburg Eins.

"You made way for them, didn't you, commander?"

Walter's group had maintained a confrontational attitude to the end, but Oscar had shown his understanding of them. He had shown compromise.

…It's over.

It was all over, it was all going to change, and it would all begin anew.

But before then, Mayer wanted to sleep. He was exhausted.

"Next time, I'll be even more…"

He trailed off and closed his eyes.

As he did, he heard a voice from his communicator.

"Um, we are up above Berlin and transmitting on all frequencies. We are currently ascending toward space. Everyone in Germany and the neighboring countries, turn in the direction you think Berlin is in and look up in the sky. You should see a cloud rising through that sky. What you're seeing is…"

Mayer was no longer listening. He had fallen into a peaceful sleep.

Final Chapter: The Legend Arrives

12/25/1935

At 4:05 PM, the change arrived gradually but clearly.

Else gathered strength in her eyebrows and kept her eyes open.

The Kaiserburg pierced through sound, split the sky, and broke free of gravity. It was desperate. The view outside the window changed from blue to indigo and from indigo to black. The stars looked like a sprinkling of sand in that black expanse.

The ship seemed to let out a scream, but she did not mind. She did not feel that she was going to die. She simply felt a need to keep her eyes from closing.

The moment she had been waiting for arrived almost too suddenly.

The inertia the ship had been unable to neutralize vanished from her body.

They were free of the bonds of gravity. They had left the earth.

This was space.

They had arrived in outer space.

"…"

She felt like it had happened too quickly.

She felt a pain her chest, but it was nothing compared to the difficulties back on the surface.

She remembered everything that had happened.

She had disobeyed her father.

She had met Walter and Paul and they had shown her the Kaiserburg.

She had ridden a bicycle as the military pursued her.

She had flown through the sky.

She had learned why Walter wished to go to space.

She had learned what it was she wanted.

She had convinced her father and argued with Mayer.

She had repaired the Kaiserburg and flown it.

She had fought and ended that final battle.

It may not have been a very long time, but it had been a dense, weighty, and passionate time.

It was all of that which had led to this moment.

"Ah…"

She realized her body had grown tense. The great speed pressing her into her seat was gone. She looked down and found her clenched fists had grown white. She spread her hands and found marks from her nails on her palm.

She spread her arms as if to embrace something. She deeply embraced the expanse of emptiness before her eyes and she wrapped her arms around her shoulders. Her body was trembling.

…I'm here.

She had arrived in the world of stars that she had always seen in the sky and reached a hand out toward.

…Amazing.

Not even she knew what exactly was amazing, but she had a feeling it would be a lot less fun if she did know. She simply had to think that something about this was amazing.

She held in the feelings that threatened to escape her chest and she gave a meaningless and deep nod. She nodded again and again.

…Thank goodness.

She was truly thankful.

The two in front of her began to move. They both gave sighs of relief, so they must have tensed up as well.

"We're here," said Paul. "I'm thinking of stopping by the moon. Any complaints?"

"No," replied Walter. "Let's start by going as far as Huber's Treasure Island."

The ship moved slightly and the white moon came into view out the window. It was much clearer than on the surface. Else took her arms from her shoulders and asked a question.

"How long will it take?"

"About an hour."

"The moon's pretty far away, isn't it?"

"We can accelerate like crazy, but it's best to play it safe since the moon's right in front of us. The engines are still roaring even though we gave them some moonlight resistance."

"Will they still work if we get close?"

"Scared? Then I guess we'll head back home."

"Don't be silly."

Walter smiled at her sharp tone.

"Yeah, after trashing Berlin like that, they probably won't forgive us if we don't do something that makes it worth it."

"Do you feel even a little bad about destroying your hometown like that?" asked Else.

He sighed as he answered.

"Yeah. I wish I'd done a more thorough job of it."

"Try to keep that to just a wish."

She frowned and removed her seatbelt. When she noticed that the metal seatbelt fastener was oddly light, she recalled the laws of the universe.

"Come to think of it, isn't space supposed to be weightless?"

"Yes, but the ship is giving us half of Earth's gravity right now."

"Eh? But I wanted to try swimming through the air."

"Your skirt would spread out and you'd have no way of holding it down. Also…"

Walter removed his seatbelt with his left hand and stood up. He turned toward her while holding his right arm.

"Without any gravity, the blood from my arm would get everywhere. That would be a complete mess."

"You're right."

Unsure what expression to make, Else stood up. As she did, she placed a hand on the radar and accidentally altered its scale.

…Oh, that's probably not good.

But then she realized there would not be any enemies up here anyway.

That was when she noticed something odd on the radar.

The scale was at its maximum which was meant for use in space . Every centimeter on the screen was a thousand kilometers, but all smaller readings would be ignored. Only something with as much power as the Kaiserburg would show up.

However, the display showed something unbelievable.

"Eh?"

It was a wall of light.

The radar showed that wall directly ahead of them. The entire tip of the display glowed brightly, so a very powerful spirit stone had to be there.

"Does that mean…"

A giant mass of spirit stone lay in their path.

"You don't mean…!"

She looked forward where she saw Walter and, over his shoulder, the moon.

…The moon!?

Walter must have noticed her mouth hanging open. He followed her gaze, turned back toward her, and approached.

"Walter, look at this."

He checked the radar as she asked.

Paul also removed his seatbelt and walked over.

The three of them stared at the radar display and sighed.

The first to speak was Walter.

"I see," he muttered. "Professor, this is what my father was talking about at the very end, wasn't it?"

"You mean the ultimate treasure he said was floating in space?"

"Yes."

Walter went on to say what they were all thinking.

"The moon is made of spirit stone. This is a tremendous discovery!"

"That explains why the engines resonate with the moonlight."

"It does! It really does!"

He faced the moon and put a hand in his pocket. He pulled at a photograph, looked at it, and took a few steps. Slowly, while being careful about his right arm, he sat in his seat.

Else almost said something, but Paul stopped her with a gesture .

"He's crying."

"Eh?"

"That photo is the only one that shows all three members of his family."

"…"

"It was torn in two. The half he has shows Huber…and the other half shows his mother and him as a kid."

Else said nothing. She simply listened to what Paul said next.

"Huber took that other half."

"Do you have anything like that?"

"Once you're my age, you're too embarrassed to tell anyone about things like that."

That man had to have his reasons for coming this far.

That friend of Huber's stared straight forward.

So did Walter.

…That's right.

Else felt her mood soften.

She felt much closer to that young man who always seemed so detached.

Then, a new question came to her.

…He came all this way for that, but where will he go now?

That question applied to herself as well.

She nodded and spoke to him.

"Walter."

He said nothing.

"Do you have anything to tape the photo back together? If not, I 'll lend you some tape."

"…"

He remained facing forward, but she did not mind.

"Hey, Walter. What are you going to do now?"

He finally gave a weak response to that.

"What do you mean?"

She took a step forward.

"If the moon is made of spirit stone, a whole bunch of ships like the Kaiserburg can be made. Doesn't that mean everyone can go to space? If so, there's no need to sink the Kaiserburg in the ocean."

"In hindsight, I suppose so."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"…?"

She placed a hand on his head and faced forward.

She saw the moon there. The man who had beaten them here would be orbiting it.

…Just like you, we desired to go farther and came here.

With those words in her heart, she spoke to Walter.

"This isn't enough to satisfy me."

"…"

"What about you?"

Walter looked up with a stiff expression.

"Else…"

He hesitated but finally spoke.

"You're wearing lipstick, aren't you?"

"Wh-why would you mention that now!?"

She had not expected this and grew flustered, but he only smiled. It was his usual smile, but it had a somehow cheerful look to it. She heard Paul laugh bitterly behind them.

She brought a hand to her lips and looked at Walter. He had already taken back control of the conversation, so he looked up at her spoke with strength back in his voice.

"Fine. But if you stay with me, you'll end up regretting it."

"And you'll end up regretting it if you stay with me."

"Why?"

"Because I dream big."

She felt heat in her cheeks, intentionally looked away from Walter, and faced forward again. However, she was no longer looking at the moon. She was looking at the black expanse beyond it.

That was where she had to go.

"Can we really do this?"

"How far are you planning to go?"

"That's simple. …Farther than anyone, farther than anything, and as far as possible. Can you keep up?"

"Farther than anyone, farther than anything, and as far as possible, you say?"

"Yes! Farther than anyone! Farther than anything! As far as possible!"

She stretched her arms out toward the scattered stars, the deep emptiness, and space.

The world spread out infinitely before her.

Closing Words

And thus mankind took its first step into space.

I am sure many will not accept this story as fact. It does speak much about people who are no longer living and much about things which have not been thoroughly investigated. However, it is the truth.

I know this because I heard it from my adventurer of a grandfather. When I was young, I would ask him to tell the story at every opportunity.

He would often say that he would not have lived such a fulfilling life if it had not been for them.

My grandfather was a simple soldier who appeared in this story . He is no longer with us, but his way of living greatly influenced me.

I believe I will eventually have another chance to tell stories of him.

I will now set down my pen while I wish good fortune to earth' s civilization that is now able to fly from the Milky Way and to all the people who paved the way to this era.

12/25/1996 4:05 PM – The same time as when mankind first reached space for the second time.

-Michael Schrier

Afterword

Imagine a woman you haven't seen in a while approaches you and says you need to get married because she's pregnant.

I think getting a phone call saying your novel just won first prize is a lot like that.

Or at least, it was for me. I felt like I had bloody sweat pouring from my nose, my ears, and the top of my head.

After all, something I had prepared quite a while ago had all of a sudden shown up and was telling me to think about my future. On top of that, it was entirely my own fault. Really, what are you supposed to do then?

Also, my friends are way too persistent. One of them called me up out of the blue.

"Ah! Kawakami? I saw it, I saw it, I saw it! I saw that embarrassing thing of yours!"

"You use a cellphone, don't you? How can you yell something like that out in public? Anyway, what did you see?"

"Your name's in a magazine."

"Eh? Really? (I should really check on these things.)"

"Heh heh heh. Exposing yourself in a national magazine. What a naughty guy. Now I'm gonna go tell the others."

"Dammit, don't go telling everyone without asking permission."

"Fine. So can I tell everyone? Okay, I asked. Time to go tell them."

Everyone learned about it in no time. You don't realize how scary our computerized society is until you experience it yourself.

But since this is happening, it's happening. Just a bit ago, I read back through the book while listening to Mighty Wings from Top Gun because it was my background music while writing it.

"Who was rewarded the most in this novel?"

It made me wonder that.

Now then, now then. London will be the next stage.

September 1996. A clear morning.

-Kawakami Minoru